



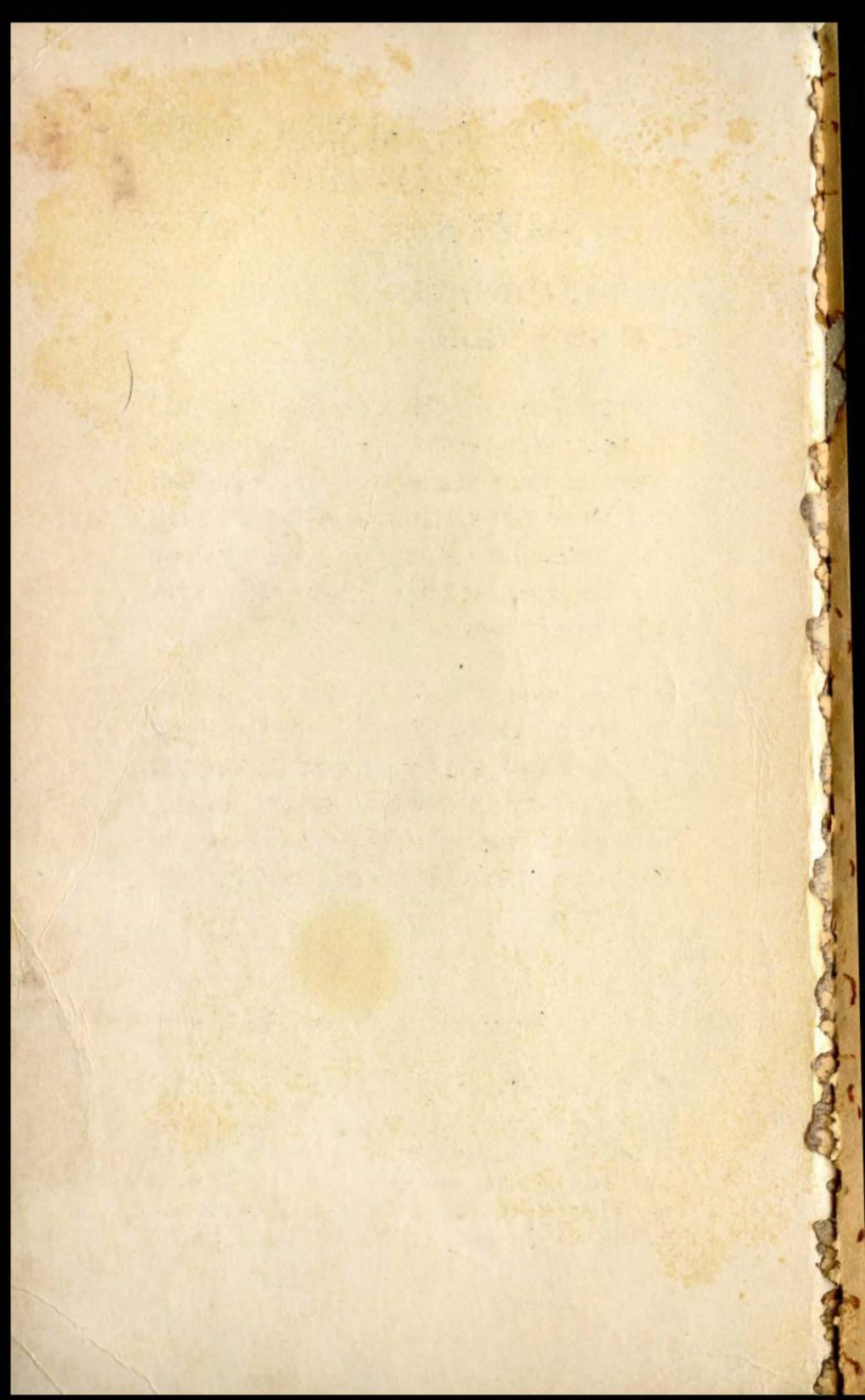
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CRY, BROTHER, CRY

A Novel Of Delinquency And
Mobsters In The Making



JACK KARNEY AUTHOR OF **WORK OF DARKNESS**



DELINQUENTS ON THE RUN

Young Joey Koslo suspected his kid brother was mixed up in the rackets when a labor leader was knife-slashed and Duke was picked up for questioning. And when he caught the teen-age boy passing dope, he knew it was time to get him out of town.

But the mob bosses had already set out to silence Duke. And in the gunfight that followed, the boys found themselves trapped between the law and the lawless—at the climax of their flight down the dead-end street of juvenile delinquency and crime.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Jack Karney, now on the staff of the District Attorney's office, grew up on New York City's East Side. He was himself a member of a teen-age gang. He is the author of several novels, including COP and WORK OF DARKNESS.

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A Novel

Cry, Brother, Cry

JACK KARNEY

Author of: WORK OF DARKNESS

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has been carefully selected by the POPULAR LIBRARY
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**FOR
THE LITTLE PRINCESS
AMY LISA JASLOW**

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Chapter 1

You turn the familiar corner and you can feel the tightness inside you. One more block and you'll be home, one more dirty, stinking, lovable block. Home means Mom and Duke . . . and Tina. Just thinking of them fills you with music, sweet and low, and you want to throw out your chest and sing, "Joey's home. After two years in the Big House, Joey Koslo's back."

Things haven't changed much on Orchard Street. There's an empty lot where Sam's barbershop used to be and the mailboxes have new colors, white letters on a red and blue box. That's all that's new. The rest is old stuff; the same dirty-faced kids running in and out of the hallways, wrestling under the pushcarts piled high with junk; the big tenements, yellow with age, chipped and dirty, leaning a little more toward the ground, threatening to collapse any minute.

The neighbors, eyes glittering, nostrils quivering with some kind of charged excitement, mouths jawing, don't look at you as you pass by. The Sanitation sprinkler truck rolls slowly down the street, washing away the dust and the garbage and the bloodstains. As far back as you can remember there have been dust and garbage and bloodstains on Orchard Street.

And there'll be a lot more.

The dust comes out of the chimneys, out of the wind; the garbage from pushcarts, from people in apartments who believe the gutter is one big garbage can; the blood drips from noses, runs out of slashed bodies, spurts from ripped arteries, staining the dirty gutter a rusty orange color.

That's how it was before you went away, that's how it is when you return, and before you know it, more blood will flow on Orchard Street, some yours, some your brother Duke's.

A package of old clothes under his arm, Joey took the steps two at a time, stopped at the landing to rest. He felt suddenly weak, as if his muscles and bones had turned to soft rubber. The acrid scent of stray cats hung heavy in the hallway. A woman began to yell obscenities, a child answered, curt and sassy. Far up in the house a tin can clattered down the stairs and then suddenly, as he hesitated before his apartment, the silence was deafening.

With a quick movement Joey opened the door and stepped inside.

"Mom?" His voice was soft, a little hoarse from taking too many punches around the throat. "It's me, Joey."

She came out of the bedroom, tall and thin, eyes squinting. A cold wind ran over him. How she'd aged! The black hair was streaked gray, the arms were bony and full of blue veins, the cheeks pale. The black cross around her neck seemed to weigh her down.

"Joey?" Her lips moved. She stared at his punch-marked face, the brown unruly hair. "How are you, Joey?"

"Okay." *Hug me, Mom, kiss me!* "How're you?"

She didn't answer him and he felt a vague unease. He said, "You didn't come to visit me last time, you and Duke. But I guess you weren't up to it."

She didn't look at him. "Yes, I wasn't up to it," she said.

He looked out the window, at the tenements full of shadows, at the blue-and-gray sky, at the mattresses on the fire escapes still there from the night before.

"How's Duke?"

Her eyes mirrored a sick sorrow. "How should he be? He's your brother."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing."

Unable to conceal his anger, he cried, "For cryin' out loud, Mom, I couldn't come to Pop's funeral. The warden asked me if I wanted to go. I refused. That's no crime."

"He was your father. He loved you. You were his favorite. He died from a broken heart because you went to prison." Her voice rose as she said bitterly, "And I had to go on home relief."

He shook his head. "I didn't kill Pop; he died because it was his time to go. And don't worry about this home relief. I'm home, ain't I?"

He couldn't explain why he hadn't attended his father's

funeral. How do you explain what goes through a guy's mind when the warden says, "I'm sorry, Koslo, you'll have to wear cuffs. Your record here doesn't warrant our letting you out under minimum custody."

And you think of the neighbors looking down at the bracelets on your wrists, at the cops you've got for a body-guard and you can hear them whispering, and Mom, crying for Pop, has to cry for you too. So you tell the warden what you think of his idea....

"Joey," Mom said, "your clothes are still in your room."

He wanted to tell her how he'd changed, how he loved her, but instead he said, "How's Tina?"

Her expression changed.

"Mom, did I say something dirty?"

"She's a good girl, Joey. She's not for you."

Once, boxing at the Garden, Joey's opponent, a Mexican, had caught him with a shot under the heart, knocking the wind out of his lungs, making him sick and nauseated. Mom had done that to him without a blow. Two years in the can and he was still the same Joey Koslo, tough guy and graduated juvenile delinquent.

"Tina is for me, she's my girl. Mom, a guy can change. All I want is a job, no more fighting in the streets, no more fighting in the ring, just a job . . . and a chance to set things right with you . . . and Pop."

She searched his face, then turned away. "I'll make coffee."

He couldn't blame her. God knows he'd given her enough trouble, cops on the doorstep all hours of the day and night because of his gang activities. A kid, restless and a little scared, he'd wind up a nobody, joining a gang, getting in trouble. Now he has twenty-three, still restless, but for a different reason; he wanted to be somebody decent.

He looked around the room, at the linoleum, faded and torn, at the crack running in a zigzag line across the calcedined ceiling and disappearing down behind the black stove. Somebody in the street was blowing a police whistle like crazy as Joey went into the bedroom. The double bed he and Duke shared had been shifted close to the wall. There was a new chest of drawers on the opposite side of the window from the old one. A blue-and-white Seward High banner hung over a picture of Mickey Mantle. A new card-

board wardrobe closet stood in the corner near the fire-escape window.

In the wall closet he found his two suits and two pairs of summer slacks. He selected the gray slacks and dropped them across the blanket-covered bed. From the old chest of drawers he took a half-sleeved white shirt, clean but slightly yellow from two years of nonwashing.

The pants were snug around the hips but the shirt fitted. Before prison he'd been boxing professionally as a 147-lb. welterweight; now he weighed fifteen pounds more. He searched unsuccessfully for his shoes, and wondered if they'd disintegrated into dust. Staring at the new wardrobe and chest of drawers, he didn't have to be told they belonged to Duke. Mom had separated the man from the boy, the good guy from the bad, the eighteen-year-old high-school youth who'd graduate next year from the Sing Sing graduate.

He opened the new wardrobe closet. Six pairs of new slacks, a dozen sport shirts, three sport jackets, a leather jacket and a heavy sweater hung neatly from wooden hangers. On the floor eight shoe boxes stood in a row.

Joey whistled. Good for Duke! The kid must have a part-time job after school. He frowned. If he made that kind of money, why the home relief?

Joey lifted three boxes to the bed, opened them. The shoes were Duke's all right, four sizes larger than his. He brought out three more boxes. There were no shoes in the first one he opened, just a bundle of chamois cloth wrapped around something heavy. He squeezed the cloth, ran his hands over the outline of the concealed object, and began to breathe heavily.

He grasped one end of the cloth and jerked it away. A shiny new .38-caliber Colt lay on the bed, blue-black against the gray blanket. With shaking hands he picked up the revolver, flipped open the cylinder. It was empty. The revolver looked as if it had never been fired, it was so clean.

He heard Mom moving around outside, quickly rewrapped the revolver with the chamois cloth. He got up, looked around the room, then, remembering, pushed the bed aside. Squatting, he lifted the corner of the linoleum, felt with his fingers. The slat was loose. He lay the package under the floor, pushed the slat into place. Once he'd loosened that slat so he could have a hiding place for extra

money he didn't want around the house. It would come in handy now until he could get rid of the revolver.

He wondered again about Duke's clothes.

Shoving the bed into place, he cried, "Mom, you sell my shoes?"

Mom stuck her head through the doorway. "I gave them to the rag man. Two years . . ."

"These prison shoes I got on are killing me. Anyway, I'm not barefoot."

He went outside and watched Mom slice a ham sandwich diagonally.

"You don't have to get so fancy." He hadn't meant to shout.

She looked up, sucked in her breath.

He said, more gently. "I'm not hungry. Those clothes in the closet, you didn't buy 'em for Duke." She didn't answer. He said, "Maybe he works after school?"

She set the sandwich on the table. "I'll pour the coffee."

"What's with the dumb routine?" he said. "You can't answer me? I don't belong to this family?"

She faced him squarely. "Why don't you ask him? You're his brother. He looks up to you." Tears filled her eyes. "It's your fault, Joey, everything is your fault."

"Okay, if it makes you feel better."

She looked at him and he felt regret and misery for all the heartaches he'd given her, for all the tears.

"I'm going for a walk." He opened the door. "Two years and that lousy crack in the ceiling still ain't fixed. What the hell you pay rent for?"

Chapter 2

The Orchard A.C. had clubrooms in a cellar just off De-lancey Street, below the pushcart area. Joey and fourteen friends had organized the Athletic Club ten years before, strictly for social and athletic purposes. Individually or as a team in competition with neighborhood settlement-house

clubs, they participated in swimming, softball, basketball and field events. Occasionally they ran a dance.

As they got older and more involved in gang intrigue, they engaged in fewer and fewer athletic events. When the police ruled out softball on South Street and basketball in the school yard after school hours, the boys found ample excuse for loitering on street corners. Soon the police forbade what they called unlawful assembly, whereupon the boys decided to rent clubrooms where the public would be barred, the police wouldn't interfere, and they could do as they pleased. The rent and upkeep were paid by taxing each member. How the member got the tax money was his problem.

After a while, girls drifted into the clubrooms. Joey didn't know where they came from but every week there would be new girls, friendly girls, some scared, seeking companionship, others brazenly bold, eager to be initiated on the cot in the small kitchen.

As the gang grew older, some got respectable jobs, married and drifted away. Others got jobs in the rackets. A few went to prison. Two had gone to college and, as far as Joey knew, had graduated and become professional men. A few just vanished into nowhere, without a good-by, never to be heard from again.

As the older members quit the Orchard A.C. new boys took their places. Now they had the headache of maintaining the clubrooms. By the time Joey had gone away to prison the charter members had all left, one way or another. Now . . .

Joey pushed open the door marked "For Members Only. This Means You" and walked into the dimly lit room. Only a bridge lamp gave off pale light. A boy and girl were kissing on the couch, his shirt buttons open, chest exposed. About a dozen others danced and sang to an Elvis Presley record on the table-model hi-fi. One redhead girl paused in front of the kissing couple.

"Why don't you go to the back room? You're making me nervous."

Without turning, the boy simply placed his hand on her chest and pushed. The redhead crashed into a chair and sprawled to the floor. Sitting up, she cursed the boy in a stream of obscenities.

Joey said, "What was that last word? Mother-what? That's a new one on me."

All activity instantly stopped as they realized a stranger had violated the sanctity of the clubroom. The boy and girl on the couch broke. In a flash, six boys had circled Joey, each ready and waiting. One of them, a blond boy of seventeen, a little more impatient than the others, had his switchblade in his hand, a finger on the button.

Joey said, "That's a helluva welcome I get, Pinto."

Pinto, tall and bony, clasped his head with both hands. "Joey! Joey Koslo! Duke'll kill me. Fellers, you know Duke's brother."

The tension was gone as they gathered around him, asking questions, showing him, like children trying to impress a celebrity, the new television set in the corner, the hi-fi, the new furniture. Joey recognized girls who had worn braids two years ago, now big in the chest and high in the seat, once soft skinny boys now full of muscles, showing them off with T shirt half-sleeves rolled to the shoulder line.

The kitchen door opened and a blonde stepped into view, her hair mussed, a smug contented smile on her face as she led out a tall redhead boy. The youth was narrow in the waist, wide in the shoulders, and he walked with a barely perceptible limp.

Joey's face filled with pleasure and the weight on his back lifted. This was Duke, his handsome brother Duke, who could have been a movie star if it hadn't been for the gimp leg he'd got as a kid. Not that you could notice it when Duke got moving. Hell, no, Duke could outrun half the guys, he could box good and swim like a fish. Sometimes you forgot altogether he had the limp. At others, when he was real tired, you remembered all those years Duke had spent in bed.

Just before Duke switched off the kitchen light, Joey caught a glimpse of the cot. It was a new one, but, he laughed to himself, just like the old one, the sheets were wrinkled, the blanket half on the floor.

Duke stopped in his tracks, as if he were seeing a mirage.

"Joey!" A big grin spreading over his freckled face, he let out a whoop and began knocking the boys left and right to reach Joey's side. All the suspicion, all the speculation

and doubt drained out of Joey as they embraced and jumped about, shouting, back-slapping.

"How was it, Joey?"

"A cinch—did it on my head."

"Bet you ran the joint."

"Hell, they wouldn't let me out on parole till my time was up, that's how good I ran that joint."

The blonde looked up at Duke. "You boys could do better on that cot."

Abruptly the smile left Duke's face. "Don't get so cute, Francie. I'll run you out on your ear. This is my brother Joey. This is Francine."

Wet lips partly open, big blue eyes studying Joey's face, she said, "You don't look like brothers." She pressed her body against Joey. "Hello, brother."

Joey said, "Friendly girl you got."

"She's a good kid. After all, you're my brother."

Up in the Big House, he'd laid awake nights thinking of Tina, remembering sharply the hot kisses, the playing around, her body close to his, thinking how it would be when he got out. Tina was his, body and soul. She would always be. Nobody but Tina . . . After a while, for some reason he couldn't understand, it wasn't just Tina he made love to in his imagination. There had been a girl before her, a fat kid called Marlene. And an older woman who'd once enticed him into her apartment by asking him to deliver her groceries. Toward the end, during the last few months, Tina had again invaded his thoughts.

Now Francine . . .

Joey said, "Better take your girl away, Duke."

Duke was hurt. "Don't you want Francine?"

Joey blinked. Things had changed since he'd gone away. In Joey's day a guy's girl was special property, his alone, safe and inviolable. Only somebody looking for trouble dared approach her.

Joey said, "I like Francine, but she's your girl, Duke."

There was love and respect in the blue eyes. "You're my brother, Joey."

Joey felt foolish, with everybody around watching, like a bunch of kids, he thought, interested in the outcome of a sporting event. Joey'd once read that some tribe, Eskimo or Indian or African, practiced this kind of love toward their

fellow men. If a man liked you, even if you were a stranger, he would send his daughter or his wife to your bed.

Francine took his hand. "Come on, brother."

"Gimme a rain check."

Duke's happy look was gone. "What's wrong with Francine?"

"Wrong?" He slapped Duke's back. "She's okay. Jeez, Duke, up there in my hotel on the Hudson I used to dream about girls like Francine. I made my mind up the first chance I got, I'd pack myself in a bed with a blonde and stay there until one of us died. But now I got different things on my mind. I'm not in the mood. When Francine goes in back with me, hell, I don't want to think of nothin' but her." To prove he liked her, Joey kissed her lips. "I want that rain check."

Her face still devoid of emotion, she said, "It's up to Duke."

Duke nodded. "Joey whistles, you run."

Joey said, "Duke, I want to make talk."

"Sure, let's powwow," Duke said. "Okay, fellers, the show's over." He took Joey to one side. "You need money, Joey?"

"No, I got plenty. I saw the new clothes you got yourself. Nice. Can I ask how does a kid going to school get enough dough to buy stuff like that?"

Duke laughed. "I could say it's none of your business. But it is. You're my brother. I make money cutting crap games."

Joey frowned. "You'll get jammed up, sooner or later. Don't be like me, Duke. I was a nobody trying to be big. You got the stuff to do it the right way. You got the brains to be like that engineer who built the jet. Remember how you always talked about how you'd build a rocket that'd go to the moon?"

As if embarrassed, Duke looked away. "Kid stuff."

"Muggings, stealing, that's kid stuff."

Duke looked surprised. "On that I agree a hundred per cent. Not me, Joey. I'm too smart for that."

"One more year of high school, then college, and you'll be somebody."

Duke had an odd look on his face. "It's a big year."

"Just stay clean, Duke."

He smiled. "With you around, Joey, I got a choice?"

Looking over Joey's shoulder, he called out, "Hi, Benny. Joey, look who's here."

Benny Cantor was tall and thin, his shoulders sagging as if all his problems were piled on his back. Despite the hot weather he wore a sport jacket and a striped cap. The cigar in his mouth would never know the light of a match because Cantor hated smoke. But chewing on a cigar gave him a feeling of power and he enjoyed it.

Cantor was five years Joey's senior but the gray temples gave him an even older appearance. Hand outstretched, he had the same confident smile Joey remembered so well.

"You can take that mattress," he'd tell Joey and Joey would go out and slug his opponent into oblivion. For Benny, his manager.

Joey ignored the outstretched hand. Cantor shrugged. "Didn't know you were out, Joey. I'm sure glad to see you. If there's anything I can do for you, a broad, money . . ."

"You did plenty for me, Benny. I don't want any more."

The brown eyes winced. "Don't you ever forget? I'm moving up in the business." He nodded toward a stocky man who stood with a fixed expression in his eyes guarding the doorway. "I rate me a muscle man. Joey, I got connections. For my one-time protégé I can put myself out a little." He took the cigar out of his mouth and said to Duke, "Kid, why don't you take a walk?"

Duke wasn't offended. "That's a good idea, Benny."

Joey stared at Duke's back as he went to join Pinto on the couch. "I got no time to talk to you, Benny. Gotta see somebody special. Look me up sometime—but not too soon."

Joey went outside, Cantor at his heels. It was warm and muggy, the faintest of winds blowing from the south. People walked by, faces damp and shiny.

"Wait a minute, Joey," Cantor pleaded. "For cryin' out loud, don't make me look like a *schmuck*." He stopped Joey on the sidewalk. "Can you use fifty, Joey? A homecoming present. Here, take it. As a favor to your old friend."

That was how it used to be, Joey remembered. Buddies, they ate together, catted out together, helped each other with money. Benny was the guy who had kept Joey in tape, liniment and bandage; who had taught him how to hook and jab and cross; who had worked over him, fixing his cuts

and bruises, rubbing new life into his tired muscles so he could go on for another round.

And Benny had watched three of Augie Verde's hoods send Joey to the hospital for two months with fractured ribs, a concussion and a broken nose while he stood by and did nothing.

Joey said, "I don't need your dough, Benny. I don't want it."

He pleaded. "For old times' sake."

"It's eating you up, isn't it?"

Cantor stiffened. "I'm too tough for a conscience to bother me. You know I'm working for Augie."

"You always worked for Augie Verde. You weren't my manager, he was."

"That ain't so. He's a tough guy, Joey. When he gives orders . . ."

"He gave orders, all right. Only you didn't have to listen."

"Verde talks, you got to listen. He wants you should do something, that's how it has to be. He's a big man on the waterfront, Joey. Someday he'll move up, then maybe Benny Cantor will take over Verde's job."

Joey sneered. "You'll never fit in Augie's shoes. If you wasn't his brother-in-law you'd be out peddling pencils."

Cantor looked around to see if his bodyguard had overheard. "Joey, you gonna box again?"

"I got a bellyful of that."

"I could get you setups."

Joey said something obscene.

Cantor frowned. "Okay . . . Augie was talking only the other day. He likes you, Joey, and he's sure got respect for a guy who didn't let out a peep about who worked him over and why. Not that it would've done you any good, but if you'd opened up about that dive you was supposed to take, there'd have been investigations and stuff and Augie'd have been annoyed to hell."

Joey said, "I didn't open up because I'd be wasting my time. I didn't do it for you or Augie."

Cantor laughed. "Okay, don't get excited. I just wanted you to know Augie's got no hard feelings."

"That's nice of him."

"You almost killed the Ox, one of Augie's best men."

"I should've got the other two guys."

"Forget it, Joey. Say, how about me talking to Augie about putting you on the payroll?" He flung his cigar into the gutter. "You're still my friend, Joey."

Joey thought: He is your friend, Joey. What the hell could the guy do when those hoods busted you up, join in so they could give him the business too?

Joey's attitude softened. "Thanks, Benny, I don't want to work for Verde or anybody else in the rackets. I just want to be left alone."

"If that's what you want."

"That goes for Duke too."

"Duke?"

Swiftly and firmly Joey said, "Don't gimme that, Benny. You didn't come down to the club because you got homesick for your old clubrooms."

Benny laughed shortly. "Okay, so I came down to see one of the kids. That's a crime?"

Joey blew air into his fist. "I'm not a cop so I can't say. Anyway, I'm not interested in the other kids. Just leave Duke alone. He's in the minor leagues. Let the others work their way up to Verde's major league, but leave Duke alone."

"You're exaggerating, Joey. Sometimes Duke runs errands, makes himself a deuce."

"No more errands." His voice shook. "You understand me, Benny? If I find he's working for you, I'm gonna make trouble."

Cantor's good humor vanished. "One word and my boy Matt Green, standing behind you, rips your heart out."

"I'm all shook up."

"I don't know why I take this stuff from you, Joey."

"Stay away from my brother. I did time. My brother never will. I'll see to that even if I got to piss on your grave."

Turning on his heel, Joey walked up Orchard Street, fists clenched in his pockets to keep his hands from shaking. He crossed to Delancey Street and turned into Attorney, stopping in front of a yellow tenement house near the corner. This was where Tina lived, up there on the second floor, and thinking of her, his pulse began to throb and he wanted to whistle up, a long-drawn-out two-finger whistle that would say, "Tina, it's me, Joey." Like in the old days when he'd been too lazy to climb the stairs.

A young man and a girl were standing close in the vestibule. The man was tall and thin and as he leaned to kiss the girl Joey thought of a tree bending with the wind. Joey clucked sadly. Didn't long-legs know there was a better place for muzzling in the rear of the hallway, near the radiator? How many times had he and Tina . . .

As he passed them he heard the girl's voice, laughing and full of soft music. . . . Tina! He stopped short, his head coming around in a stiff turn. She looked so beautiful, the blue skirt tight around her shapely body, the slip showing whitely through the pink lace blouse. The dark hair neatly combed behind her ears looked a shade lighter as if it had been bleached by the sun.

He stood staring, completely stunned.

"Joey," Tina murmured, hazel eyes round and full of surprise.

"Yeah, Joey," he cried, turning on the young man. "You big long-legged bastard, I'll—"

She stepped between them. "Oh, no, you won't." Eyes bright, head up, she said, "Still the same tough guy. You haven't changed, have you?"

"What the hell you expect? I come home and here you are muzzling around with this guy. I don't get it, Tina. This is me, Joey. You promised . . ."

"Mel," she said to the boy, "I'll see you tomorrow."

Mel straightened. His voice firm, he said, "I don't like his boorish attitude. I don't like his tone. I don't like him. I'm staying."

She smiled gently. "He's Joey Koslo, an old friend. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

Joey cried, "Maybe you'd be better off if you forgot to see her tomorrow, buster."

Mel ignored him. "All right, Tina, if that's what you want."

She watched him go out into the street.

"Who's that lug?"

"Mel Pollen, studying pharmacy at L.I.U. He's six-one, brown eyes—"

"How does he kiss, that's what interests me. Tina, what's wrong?"

"Please, Joey," she protested. "I've got to go up and wash. I work in the Settlement House, Joey. You remember Mr. Forrester?"

He cried, "Never mind Forrester. What's got into you?" "Nothing."

There was a dryness in his mouth, as if he'd swallowed sand. "You didn't come up to see me after that first month. Every month I asked the warden how come he refused you permission to see me. How could he refuse, he asked me, if you didn't write. So I figured they'd scared you, fingerprinting you that first time, like all the visitors. Then I figured your old lady wouldn't stand for it. I made excuses for you, a million excuses, because all the time I thought we'd make up for it when I got home."

Her face puckered in distress as she said, "Two years is a long time."

"One month after I got up there, you dropped me out of your life."

The color was warm in her broad face, the hazel eyes soft and limpid. Dully, she said, "My mother wouldn't let me go up again. After a while I realized she was right. Joey, it's different now. The old days are gone."

Bitterly, he said, "I see. I'm an ex-con. I almost killed a guy. I'm not even fit to talk to."

"It isn't that. People change. I've changed."

"I don't believe it. From the first day you came down to that club we belonged together."

She stared at a point on his neck. "I was a kid then. I'm older now, wiser."

"Sounds like your old lady talking." He grasped her arms. "You didn't forget my lips, Tina, our hearts beating like crazy against each other, me and you, and those big stars over Central Park. Remember?"

She looked blindly about her. "Please, Joey, please, you're hurting me."

There was a sickening throb in his head. "Tell me you don't love me. Tell me, not the sidewalk."

He couldn't tell whether she was confused or angry. "I don't love you, Joey. I look at you and I feel nothing."

He wore a stubborn, unhappy look. "I don't believe it. Is it this Mel guy?"

She shook her head. "He's just somebody I met at a dance, and we've become friends."

"You kiss all your friends?"

"If you must know, I like to kiss Mel."

"I got my initials cut in your insides."

"I feel nothing, honest to God. Give it time, Joey, and you'll forget."

"In a hundred years? *Hew'm I gonna forget your body soft against mine?*"

She began to cry. "That's all in the past, a piece of ancient history. Good-by, Joey."

He moved aside, hot and sick, and watched her enter the hallway. A few steps and she had disappeared, swallowed up by the darkness. He stood there, angry and lonely, cursing everybody responsible for his two years in prison: Benny, Augie, the Ox, the district attorney and the judge on the bench and, most of all, himself, for he had no doubt that if he hadn't gone away he and Tina would now be happily married.

Chapter 3

All the way upstairs Tina could feel Joey's hard lips pressing against hers. Cold shock had brought panic clamping tightly on her throat. Then the fear had gone and the kiss had become delicious, almost stupefying, so that it was all she could do to keep from embracing him. *Poor Joey, I hurt you, I know.*

She hurried her steps. She mustn't think of him. He was out of her life. They were not for each other. From the first, Momma had recognized the fact, but Tina hadn't listened. As Momma had said, a fifteen-year-old—which was what she'd been three years ago when she'd met Joey—is still too much a child to be able to think clearly.

Joey had been a boxer when she met him but he made barely enough money to doctor the cuts and bruises he sported after every fight. Soon, she knew, he'd get one punch too many and be through with boxing. And if Joey couldn't make a living with his fists, he'd make it another way, one that would involve him with gangsters on the one hand, police on the other. She'd known that, but had childishly continued a romance that could lead to nothing but heartaches, as Momma had pointed out.

When Joey had gone away for almost killing a man, Tina had had plenty of time to think.

"What are you?" Momma had asked. "Where are you going? Just figure it out. Honey, you can get yourself something a lot better than that white trash up in Sing Sing. I don't want you visiting him again. On that I insist. Imagine my sixteen-year-old daughter having her finger-prints on file in a state prison! That boy's a bum. He has no trade. When he gets out of prison, there's only one thing he can do: steal and kill for a dollar."

On and on, day after day, Momma had drilled it into her until finally she had realized that Momma was wise, Momma was right. Any time Tina felt a flicker of indecision, she remembered Momma's words: "You'll worry about the rent, you'll worry about the next dollar for food, and worst of all you'll wonder how soon the police will call to arrest him or report his body being fished out of the river. And suppose you had children . . ."

Only last week Benny Cantor had verified Momma's statements. "Tina, Joey's got nothing to worry about. I got a job all lined up for him. He won't break his back and he'll make more money than he ever saw."

If there had been any further doubt in Tina's mind, Benny had erased it.

Cold and shaken, Tina hurried into the flat. Momma sitting at the table, a big sandwich in her hands, barely glanced at Tina. Poppa sat staring out the window at the blank brick tenement wall opposite, as if he could see right through it. Tina leaned against the door for a few seconds to catch her breath, then lay her handbag on the table.

Momma, a big woman, wolfed down the sandwich, her fat red cheeks oily from the chicken.

Tina blurted, "Why don't we move out of this neighborhood?"

Momma swallowed the mouthful, almost gagging, and lifted her eyes. "Joey is back."

"He has nothing to do with it."

Momma pushed aside her plate. "Your salary at the insurance company couldn't pay the rent outside this crummy building. If your father got off his behind and looked for a job . . ."

Poppa, gaunt and thin, his skin the color of yellow parchment, shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

Momma said, "How many times I got to tell you? That boy's a bum, he's no good for you."

Poppa pushed himself up. "I'm going downstairs for a while."

"Make it a long while," Momma shouted. "Do me a favor, don't come back."

Tina passed her hands over her ears. Arguing, fighting, that's all she heard all her life. Poppa went out, a beaten look in his watery blue eyes. Poppa had always looked beaten, as far back as Tina could remember his lips had been slack, his face tormented.

Momma said, "Tina, you think I don't understand? You think your mother is big and fat and could never have been in love?" She held up a huge hand as Tina opened her mouth to protest. "I am fat and I know it, so don't kid me. And it's your father's fault, always pickin' fights, then runnin' out of the house, and I'm so lonesome I got to talk to someone so I go down to the corner bar and you can't hang 'round a bar without drinking beer. That's how I got like this. But before I married your father I was slim and pretty and I was in love and fellers loved me." Her eyes grew misty. "Plenty fellers I could've had."

Tina knew it wasn't just the beer. After every argument, as soon as Poppa walked out, Momma would raid the icebox, pulling out everything in sight, and find comfort and consolation in food.

Momma said, "But I had to pick the wrong feller. That was my mistake and it ruined my life. Oh, I loved your father when I married him. Then one day I looked around at the stinkin' poverty in my own house, the dirt and the garbage outside, and all of a sudden I hated him so bad I could . . ." She stopped, took a breath, and went on: "I don't want you making the same mistake. Tina, love can turn to hate—" she snapped her fingers—"quick as that."

Tina looked away. "You've said that before."

She slapped the table. "I'll say it again and again. You got to have it banged into your child's mind. Eighteen is a child, don't forget that." There were real tears in Momma's eyes. "It's just as easy to love somebody with money and a respectable job. You'll see, Tina."

"I'm tired," Tina said. "I think I'll lie down for a minute."

She went into her room, gently closing the door behind

her. Momma is right, she told herself, I'll find somebody else, somebody I can love and respect.

She opened the bottom drawer of the dresser and dug out a wooden box hidden beneath a sweater. From the opposite corner of the drawer, she fished out a key. On her bed she opened the box, and staring up at her was Joey, a fighting pose, wearing white trunks with black stripes down the sides, tight-fitting gloves on his fists. The picture was cracked in many places. Once, months ago, on a sudden impulse, she'd crumpled up the picture and flung it away, only to pick it up and try unsuccessfully to smooth it out.

She lifted the photograph out of the box. Joey had been so young and handsome. He still looked handsome but today she'd seen a toughness, an aging in his face—one hundred and ten stitches made a lot of scar tissue—and the callus over his eyes made him look craggy-faced.

Still studying the picture, she lay back on her pillow. They'd been in love from the first moment they'd looked at each other that day she'd entered the club. She'd been very frightened. Bessie Alpert, who had lived next door and was now married to a longshoreman, had taken Tina to meet some new friends.

"Don't be scared, honey," the bleached redhead had said. "You're lonesome, just join a club. That's how it is around here. You can't stay in your house, your folks always fighting, and you can't just stand here on the stoop, you could go nuts, so you get yourself friends and a place to hang out." Bessie had smiled mysteriously. "You'll have a lot of fun, believe me. Just don't be uppity; the boys want you to be real friendly, else they'll chase you."

So, despite misgivings, Tina had permitted Bessie to take her to the club where she met the big boy they called Blackie, Benny Cantor and a fellow called Silvie who smoked funny-smelling cigarettes she found out later were marijuana. Months later, Silvie was knifed to death by a rival gang and while his body lay in the funeral chapel, the gang invaded the parlor to carve up the corpse with a bayonet. Benny now worked for the rackets. Blackie? She didn't know what had become of him.

Blackie had frightened her from the start, coming out of the darkness, slipping his arms around her, big hands cupping her breasts, whispering strange words into her ear.

She'd felt panic as she pulled away from him, almost knocking over the husky boy entering the room.

"Hey, take it easy," the boy laughed. "I'm Joey, what's your name?"

She hadn't answered. All she wanted was to get out. Blackie came over, seized her hand.

"I ain't gonna bite you," he said. "Not unless you ask me to."

Joey said quietly. "Leave her alone, Blackie, she's only a kid."

Blackie's grip hurt. "Jailbait never stopped me."

Joey, still smiling, said, "You lettin' go, Blackie?"

Blackie stared at him for a moment, then dropped her hand, shrugged. "I don't fight over broads."

Joey looked at her hard. "She ain't a broad. She's my girl."

Looking back, she knew she'd loved Joey Koslo from the moment she'd looked into his soft, smiling eyes.

Now...

Could love be discarded like a cast-off shoe? Would she ever meet someone else she could love like she had Joey? Certainly at some time in her life she would meet a man who would become her husband. Love matches, she felt, were not made in heaven; they were accidents of time and place and people. How many times can a girl love in a lifetime? Momma said if you got rid of one love, after a while, if you concentrated, you could find somebody else to love equally as well. Love was just a state of mind and mood, Momma said.

Suddenly she ripped the photograph into a dozen pieces. Now once and for all she'd push Joey out of her mind. There'd be no picture to mull and dream over and make her feel sorry for herself. No more Joey. Good-by forever, Joey.

She buried her face in her pillow and sobbed, and after a while she got out of bed, and tenderly picking up the torn pieces, put them back into the box.

Chapter 4

Mom was crying.

Joey walked into the house and there she sat in her rocker, face buried in her hands, body heaving and shaking. For a moment he had the odd feeling Mom was crying for him, as if she knew how he felt inside and her crying would make him feel better.

All day Joey had worked in Morty's Fruit Market, unloading crates from a truck onto a wooden chute leading down to Morty's storage cellar. He'd worked hard, trying to push Tina out of his mind unsuccessfully. He liked working for Morty, enjoying the physical labor even if it had been somewhat exhausting. Now, the one-day odd job completed, he was among the unemployed again. Monday he'd look for another job—anything, so long as it kept his mind and body occupied. The three days he'd been home had seemed as long and endless as those in prison.

Joey touched Mom's arm. "What's the matter?"

She stopped crying and began to rock, her wet eyes looking up at him. "You could have steered him right, you were his hero. But you didn't. When he needed you, you were in prison."

Joey shoved both hands into his trouser pockets, lifted his shoulders in a helpless shrug. "Something happened to Duke?"

As if in answer to his question Duke came out of the bedroom, a fixed smile on his freckled face. He seemed to be limping more than usual. Behind Duke, two big-shouldered men moved into the kitchen. Joey didn't have to be told they were policemen.

The taller man said, "Mom, we're taking Duke down to the precinct. It's just routine. He'll be home in a little while."

"Tonight or tomorrow," the other policeman said.

Joey said, "Just like that? What's it all about?"

The tall man chewed gum so savagely every muscle in

his face seemed involved. "Kale, this is the kid's brother, Joe."

Kale was a squarely built man with black bushy eyebrows meeting over his aquiline nose. He had the perpetual frown of a worrier, acquired during his first year as a detective when he'd decided he was in a rough business involving very tough characters. To beat them you had to be tougher, smarter, more merciless. It was his credo that the defendant was guilty until proven innocent; that every suspect was a potential defendant, therefore deserving similar treatment.

His partner, Jackson, was tall and husky, with rough, weather-beaten features, a look of boredom belying the excitement inside him. After twenty years in the department, ten of which had been spent as a detective, Jackson still regarded every case as a new challenge. Cops versus Robbers. As simple as that. A conviction gave him a feeling of achievement, an acquittal made him brood.

"The college grad? You learn any new stuff up there, Joe? You and the kid should make a good team."

Duke said angrily, "Stop acting like cops. He did his time and it wasn't for stealing."

Kale's smile was mirthless. "Maybe you could teach him a few, Duke. A brother team. C'mon, Jackson, let's get out of here."

"So long," Duke said lightly. The officers grasped his arms and Jackson's yellow teeth were exposed in a grimace. "Don't get cute, boy."

Duke said wearily, "You searched the house and found nothing. I tell you I'm clean but you got your cop ideas. Taking me down to the precinct is a waste of time."

Kale said dryly, "We get paid for wasting time."

Joey remembered the revolver and thanked God he'd hid it well. He made a mental note to get rid of it at the earliest opportunity.

Joey said to Kale, "What you lookin' for? Maybe I can help you find it."

Kale's tone held a suggestion of mockery. "You always were the helpful type, Joe. We're looking for anything foreign—Japanese shirts, German ash trays, Italian leather bags."

Joey said, "You came to the wrong store."

Jackson grunted. "We'll settle for anything stolen from the piers and waterfront warehouses."

Duke said, "What would I be doing with a lot of crap?" "Selling it," Kale said.

Mom cried, "Not my Duke. God strike me down if I ever seen anything in this house that didn't belong to us."

Kale ignored her. "We got the rest of your gang down at the precinct, Duke. One of those kids will open up and give us the info we want. He'll get the break while the rest of you get the book. You could beat him to it."

Duke's face was expressionless. "Beat him to what?"

Jackson took a cigarette out of his pocket. "I'll explain later."

Joey said, "You can't take my brother without no warrant."

Kale's thick eyebrows lifted. "Before you went up the river, Joe, you were pretty stupid. Now you're a lawyer. It wouldn't take much for me to pull you in for obstructing an officer. You did your time and I'm not the kind who hounds an ex-con, but you could convince me very easy I'm too soft."

Jackson was bored. "We don't need a warrant, Joe, to take Duke in for questioning. When you learn to read, look it up."

Duke bridled the dirty words that rose to his lips. "What's the use of arguing with them? They had their minds made up when they walked in here. Look at 'em!" He pointed derisively. "Brokenhearted because they didn't find a damn thing."

Kale said, "Move, Duke. Out!"

Mom cried, "Don't, please, don't."

Kale said kindly, "Now, Mom, I told you Duke will be back in no time."

Joey's voice was brisk, incisive. "I want a couple words with my brother. I got a right."

Jackson said, "For cryin' out loud, you got a right? You came this far away—" he held up two open fingers—"from a seat in the electric chair. Murder One, Joey, that's what it could have been if the guy had died. But you were lucky. A lousy two years because the judge was soft. So now you got rights. Now you want to throw your weight around."

Kale said, "Aw, let 'em talk, Jackson. Maybe Joe can drill

some sense into his head. Joe, you been around. You know where it gets you holding the bag with the big secret while somebody else gets put on probation because he's a witness for the people. Tell him, Joey. Hell, we can make a deal right here. I don't care about the kids. I want to know who's the fingerman for the jobs and where the stuff goes. Not that I haven't a good idea who and where. But I need corroboration. Go on, Duke, your brother Joe's got common sense. Listen to him."

Jackson pushed Duke in Joey's direction. "Make it snappy."

Joey followed Duke to the far corner near the window. Duke stared out the window, lips tight, a wary gleam in his eyes.

Joey said, "Now level with me, Duke. You in on those jobs?"

Duke looked blank. "You gonna listen to them?"
"I got to know."

"They got nothing on me, take my word for it. Thanks for ditching the gun."

"Never mind that now. Those other kids in the gang, they'll open up. Sure as hell, they'll blow the whistle on you."

Duke laughed. "How could they? They weren't even there." He turned quickly and went out of the apartment, Kale a step behind him.

Jackson looked inquisitively at Joey, who shrugged and said, "The kid never stole nothin' in his life. I'll bet on it."

Jackson's heavy lips curled. "You should live so long," he said, and slammed the door going out.

Joey stood looking at the closed door, fear pulling at his stomach. "They weren't even there." Just words, and you could figure them any way you liked. "They" could mean that the whole gang, including Duke, hadn't been there, wherever the burglary had taken place. The kid never robbed crates on the waterfront, not Duke. Logic told him that Duke *had* stolen merchandise, alone or with somebody not a member of the gang, but he pushed the thought aside. Duke was a good kid. He had to be.

Mom walked in a half-daze around the room. Abruptly, she sat down in her rocker and began to sob, her shoulders

bowed. Joey's head began to throb, as if somebody were hitting him behind the ears with soft hammers.

He raced out of the apartment and ran all the way to the Settlement House in a gentle rain.

Chapter 5

The small black lettering in the right-hand corner of the glass door top said: MARK FORRESTER. Joey knocked and the familiar gruff voice said, "Come on in." Inside, a heavy-set man sat behind a table which served as a desk. Forrester had thick eyebrows, slate-gray eyes, an aquiline nose with large nostrils, a suggestion of a mustache over his thin upper lip. This man had not only gone to bat for Joey after his arrest for felonious assault, but, Joey knew, any youth on the East Side could enlist Mr. Forrester's aid simply by asking for it.

Forrester looked up from the typewritten paper he was studying. "Joe!" He came around his desk, obviously pleased to see him, hand outstretched. "I heard you were released."

Joey said, "I didn't come in just to say hello. I would have in a day or so, but right now I got trouble again. I mean my brother Duke."

Forrester motioned Joey to a chair. "You can talk better sitting."

While Joey explained about Duke, Forrester lighted a cigarette, his level glance never leaving Joey's face. When Joey had finished his story, he knew Forrester had not been surprised. The big man moved around the desk, sat down on the edge.

His smile bland and genial, he said, "We'll do all we can. Those boys in the Orchard Club are pretty tough. This isn't the first time they've visited the Seventh Precinct. In fact, each and every one has a number of notations on his juvenile delinquency card."

A cold tightness constricted Joey's throat. "I don't make it. What gets into a kid all of a sudden?"

Forrester squashed the butt in a wooden ash tray. "When his big brother went to prison, Duke became a hero to the gang. Did you know he's actually their leader? And a leader has to earn his title. Do I have to tell you how?"

His mouth dry, Joey shook his head. "What's done is done. Get him out of this jam and he'll never get mixed up again. I swear it."

Forrester's gaze was cold and calculating. "I want more than that. You're interested in Duke. I'm interested in every one of those kids. Let's make a deal. I get Duke out, you help me straighten out the whole Orchard gang."

Bewildered, Joey said, "How's that?"

Forrester said, "I've got no time to explain. I'm confident you'll help me. Did Duke commit any of those larcenies?"

Joey said "I got out Monday, remember?"

Forrester nodded. "Okay. You stay here, Joe. I want to talk to you when I get back."

The door opened and a voice that sent tremors running up Joey's spine said, "I'm ready, Mr. Forrester."

Mr. Forrester's eyes shifted from Joey to Tina and back again. "I believe you two know each other."

Joey didn't turn. "I thought I did. I guess I was wrong."

Tina turned to go. "I'll make that stencil immediately, Mr. Forrester."

Forrester said, "No hurry, Tina. Why don't you stay here and talk to my friend Joey for a while."

Before she could answer, he'd slipped through the door. The silence that followed was heavy as lead.

Joey broke it. "You didn't say you worked here."

"I help out evenings. During the day I work for Met Insurance. The evenings are so long, nothing to do and all that, I spend them helping here."

He faced her squarely and the pounding was back in his pulse. "You get paid, so what's the kick?"

Her hair, combed neatly into a pony tail, made her look like a fourteen-year-old kid. Almost defiantly, she said, "I don't get paid and I'm not kicking. I just thought working here was better than hanging out on Orchard Street."

He studied the warm lips, the smooth throat he'd once loved to kiss, the full breasts. "Let's not fight, Tina."

Sudden exasperation in her tone, she said, "I'm not fighting. You say the cutest things, then expect me to smile."

"What did I say?"

She fumbled for words. "Oh, I don't know."

His eyes were bright. "I was beginning to think I was nothing in your life."

"You can believe that."

He grinned. "No, Tina. If I was nothing, I couldn't get a rise out of you just talking." He took her arms. "Tina, let's go someplace where we can really talk, any place."

In a voice hardly more than a whisper, she said, "No."

A young boy came in, his freckled face lighting up in a grin when he saw them.

Joey said, "You lost or something?"

"I want Mr. Forrester," the boy said, "but I can wait."

"On the other side of the door," Joey said, kicking the door closed after him. "Tina . . ." He kissed her lips and when she turned aside, his mouth landed on her neck. "I love you, baby, you know that."

She stiffened. "Don't start that again, Joey. Open the door."

"Ten minutes will kill you?" He held her so tightly he could barely breathe. "We'll go down to the pier . . ."

In a low dead voice she said, "I've got work to do for Mr. Forrester."

He stepped away from her. "You win," he said bitterly. "Once and for all, I'm convinced."

She went to the desk and picked up a sheet of paper, stared down at it, trying desperately to conceal the turmoil going on inside her.

"So long, Joey. I'm sorry . . ."

She hesitated and he could see the indecision in her face, the quivering nostrils, the too-bright eyes.

"Tina!"

The paper shook in her hand. "I'll be through around eleven o'clock, Joey."

It was 10:30 before Forrester returned, a satisfied look in his eyes.

"It's hot," he said, "but it's stopped raining."

"That's good," Joey said. "You gonna tell me what's what?"

Forrester slid his big rear into his seat. "They released Duke a few minutes ago. He's gone home—I hope."

Joey bubbled over with excitement. "I knew we'd beat 'em. That kid's clean and don't you forget it."

Forrester leaned forward and folded his arms on the table. "You don't have to level with me, but be honest with yourself. If I were in your place, I'd ask: What happens next time Duke gets pinched?"

"There won't be a next time."

Forrester stared at him for a moment, then reached into his desk for his pipe and tobacco pouch. "I get tired of cigarettes," he said. "How come you never graduated from high school?"

Joey shrugged. "I don't know. Things happened, I can't even remember what, but all of a sudden I was a boxer with no time for school."

"You were an honor student."

Joey chuckled. "That's like saying a guy's a virgin the first time he goes up a joint. What's on your mind, Mr. Forrester? This chitchat is okay but you're leading up to something."

Expressionless, Forrester puffed on his pipe. "What are your plans, Joe?"

"Get a job."

"You could contact your old crowd. Cantor's still around. Your old buddy Archie Bilig is a bookie up in Harlem. Then there's Barnacles—"

"You taking a census or something? I said I'm gonna get a job, and it don't even have to be clean, long as it's honest. I'll stay away from my old pals."

Forrester tapped the pipe stem against his teeth. "I thought when you got back you'd return to boxing."

"You talked me into it once, not again."

Forrester laughed. "I saw you trounce boys twice your size out on the street. I thought if you came to the Settlement gym and got a little training, you could make money with your talent instead of squandering it in the gutter."

Joey snorted. "You worried about me making money? Phooey! You wanted to save a lost soul."

Forrester's quick eyes searched Joey's face. "Joe, you're not bitter? I mean about that prison bit."

"I had it coming. I didn't really want to kill that Ox, but I sure came close. I wanted him to suffer like I had up in the crummy . . ."

"Hospital," Forrester finished when Joey hesitated. "I never could get that story out of you. Just one question: Was Ox one of the three men who beat you up?"

Joey looked away. "What's the difference now?"

"They could have killed you."

They'd tried hard enough, Joey remembered. . . .

Myers, Stotz and the Ox, Augie Verde's boys, working him over quickly, methodically, first his body, then his head, with brass knuckles and heavy shoes, hitting, kicking him into a black pit of unconsciousness where he remained for five full days.

Poor Benny, crying like a baby. "You should've done like Verde wanted; you should've dived for the Greek."

"Dive," Verde had ordered. "Sangar is my boy, I'm building him up to a title shot. You're nobody, Joey, so you do a tank job for Sangar."

Joey didn't want trouble. He knew he had to lay down for ten seconds. When Augie Verde ordered, there was nothing you could do about it. But that Greek had a sharp left hand and he began to cut Joey's face, hurting, and all of a sudden in a burst of temper, Joey swarmed over him, heaving leather, chopping him down into the canvas.

For twenty-four hours, until Myers, Stotz and the Ox caught up to him, Joey was a big hero in the neighborhood. Twenty-four short hours.

Up in the hospital he thought about what had happened and the more he thought the more he wanted to forget. Asking questions, the police hung around him for a week after he'd come out of the darkness. He told them nothing. For two weeks he couldn't eat; he did his drinking through a glass tube. The sharp pain dulled and became a steady ache, a part of his life for the next two months. After a long while, he got off the bed and hobbled around, a cripple like his brother Duke. When it was time to go home ten weeks later, his knee had not entirely lost its stiffness.

No more trouble. You had enough. Just mind your business. That's what he kept telling himself.

Then a few days later, Joey was walking down the block, an ache in his head that was killing him. The Ox stood in front of the poolroom, big Ox with the dirty yellow teeth. No more trouble, Joey. Look the other way. Ox said something to a boy standing beside him. They both laughed. Keep moving, Joey. Let the no-good bastard laugh his fool head off. You got a crazy temper. . . .

Ox yelled out something obscene. "You, Joey, you," he said.

Joey turned, swore at him. Ox laughed, pointed his finger, and like a man bereft of his senses, Joey went after him, down the poolroom steps.

When the policeman succeeded in pulling Joey off the Ox, Joey stared at the broken cue stick still clutched in his fist, wondering where it had come from. He looked down at the Ox, head and face bathed in blood, and felt a sickening sweep of revulsion.

Forrester's voice broke into his thoughts. "I always had the feeling if the parole board had heard the entire story they might have been lenient. A prisoner rarely serves his full term."

Joey said, "I was a dangerous criminal; the parole board figured the judge should've given me more than two years, so they made sure I didn't get out before my time. And no matter what excuse I gave for beating Ox around, it would've been the same."

Forrester sucked on a dead pipe. "I suppose. . . . Joe, you said you needed a job. I got one for you. Fifty a week, possibly sixty."

The punch-marked face split into a grin. "When do I start?"

Forrester seemed troubled. "Right now, if you want the job." He got up, walked to the window to fix the shades. Heat lightning flickered in the distance.

Forrester spoke to the window. "We've got an appropriation from the Youth Board for block workers, college men who majored in psychology and sociology, men and women who mingle with the kids and help them adjust."

Joey chuckled. "You sicked one of them onto us, remember? He hung around the candy store, treated once in a while and then tried to move in."

Forrester didn't find it funny. "Jim Daly could have helped you and the boys with your problems and he could have kept you so busy you kids would have had no time to get into trouble. But you hoodlums found out too soon he was a social worker."

Joey's lips curled. "I got a better name for him. He smelled from stool-pigeon disease."

Forrester shrugged, his eyes disturbed. "He tried to keep you boys from gang fights. Whenever he heard of a pend-

ing rumble, he contacted the police. It was part of his job. Is there anything wrong about that?"

"At that time, sure it was wrong. Today, I don't know. What's all this got to do with me?"

Forrester weighed his words carefully. "I've already tried trained workers on the Orchard Club."

Joey laughed. "They wind up in a nuthouse?"

Forrester grunted. "Almost. One worker got so many phony leads on planned gang fights, holdups and the like, he drove the police department daffy with false tips. The boys were playing him for a sucker. The second worker got pushed down a flight of stairs and broke a leg."

Joey said, "With my boys, he'd've broke a lot more."

Forrester returned to his seat. "Those kids need somebody who can gain their support and confidence, somebody who can steer them in the right direction. But they won't accept strangers. One man, who had no connections with the Youth Board, just a new neighbor, was pushed into the river, clothes and all. If Duke hadn't pulled him out, the man would have drowned."

Joey looked at him with annoyance and resentment. "So I can gain their confidence and support. Is that it?" The cords on his neck stood out like wire. "You got the wrong guy."

Forrester pleaded. "You're my last hope, Joe. You're one of them, a little older, but Duke's friend Ernie is just a year your junior. This is your chance to help Duke and the other kids."

"They don't need me. Let their fathers bang them around a little and you'll see a difference."

Forrester said, "Your father banged you around, didn't he, Joe? What good did it do? Half of those kids are headed for the big leagues, Verde's mob. I don't expect miracles, Joe. I know that no matter what, some will land on the wrong side of the black ball. But you can help most of them. Right now your ex-manager, Benny Cantor, is using a lot of those kids for small jobs. We can't prove it but we know what's going on."

Anger cluttered his voice. "That part of the job, getting you proof? You stupid or something? Why the hell don't you get yourself another stoolie?"

Forrester wasn't surprised or offended. "Joe, I know you. You got your own code of ethics. I think they're wrong, but

at least I know I can't ask you to get a case against Cantor and that mob."

Joey snapped, "That's how I feel, because that's what I believed all my life: A stool pigeon shouldn't live with people."

"Joe," Forrester said, "just listen to me. You'll holler and I'll holler and we'll be wasting a lot of time."

Joe gave him a strained, sardonic glance. "I'm listening, ain't I?"

Forrester scratched his mustache with the pipe stem. "I want those kids to confide in you and you alone. I want you to help them with their personal problems. If it's a question of a job, I can get them jobs. I want you to talk them out of all forms of crime and violence. For their sake, for society's sake, for Duke's sake."

Joey drew a tired hand across his face. "You need the Salvation Army, not me. Hell, Mr. Forrester, most of those kids will wind up with cannons in their hands and nothing I can do will save them."

"They could have said the same thing about you. What saved you?"

"I just grew up."

"You got yourself a girl; that helped a bit. And you had a soft spot in your tough armor that could be reached. The same is true of every kid in that gang. Somebody has to find that soft spot—the reason for a boy's delinquency—and he may become a useful citizen."

Joey laughed. "You talk like a social worker."

"You know that big dark kid, Charlie Patterson?"

"His brother's a cop?"

Forrester nodded. "One of the finest. I've heard Charlie spout filth and venom against his brother."

"He hated his brother since he became a cop."

Forrester leaned forward. "He hates Neal when the gang is around. It's his way of showing off, of making himself important. Now Neal was wounded capturing two hoodlums in a cigar store holdup. Charlie had a ball over it, laughing and swearing in front of the gang. But up in the hospital I saw Charlie after the report came in Neal might die, alone out on the balcony, on his knees, tears streaming down his cheeks, praying."

Joey sighed tiredly. "I don't know what you're trying to prove. So some of the kids can pray and cry."

Forrester said, "Unless we stop these kids now with their petty jobs, we can expect them to graduate to the big time. If I could save just one of them, I'd be happy."

Joey gave him a big smile. "Consider your worries over; I'll save my brother and it won't cost you a dime."

"What will you do, talk to him? It won't work."

"He'll listen or I'll knock the hell out of him."

"Have you really looked at your brother since you came back? He's bigger than you, and he might hit back."

Outrage rang in Joey's every word. "Who said anything about hitting Duke? I never laid a hand on that kid in my life."

"Then I misunderstood you." Forrester stood up, tall and big, his eyes fixed on Joe. "I'm offering to pay you fifty dollars a week to help me save a bunch of kids."

"What do I care about those kids? Let their folks worry about 'em."

Forrester fairly shouted. "Joe, for God's sake, don't you know where to draw the line between informing and doing your duty as a citizen."

Joey's voice was cold. "I just did time on a felony rap; I got no rights of citizenship. I got no duty to anybody but me and my family."

Suddenly tranquil and composed, Forrester said, "If that's how you feel . . . Should you or Duke need me, like tonight at the precinct, be sure to call me. I'll be here."

Joey blinked, looked away. "For tonight . . . thanks a million."

Chapter 6

Joey went out into the street, angry with Forrester, with himself.

The heat had dried up the pavements. People sat around on stoops and sipped cold water out of milk bottles, the sweat jumping out on their faces like marcasites. Mattresses and white sheets cluttered the fire escapes. The noises of the city blended in a pleasant drone of sound.

Tina was leaning against the Settlement House railing. As he went by she said, "Don't call us, we'll call you."

He stopped short, slapped the heel of his hand against his forehead. "Jeez, I'm dumb, all right. I forgot." He took her hand. "Let's walk."

"Something wrong, Joey?"

Lips flat against his strong teeth, he said, "Everything is just ducky. That Forrester a mental case or something?"

She said sharply, "I don't know what went on in there, but Mr. Forrester is the nicest man I ever met."

"Maybe he's the guy; he's not so old."

"What are you talking about?"

"The feller who took my place with you. I'm kidding about Forrester, and you say Mel is just a friend, but there has to be another guy. Who is it, Tina?"

"The Prince of Monaco."

"You're too good for him."

As they crossed the gutter, a boy rode by on his bicycle; his knees kicking the girl on the handlebars. Joey said, "Remember?"

"I remember, bruises and all."

The tenseness he'd felt in Forrester's office was gone. "I shouldn't have tried to show off. Look, Ma, no hands. Look, Ma, no teeth. That bike sure got wrapped around that pump. Best of all," he whispered, "I remember how I took you upstairs to my house, and I made you forget those banged-up knees."

She looked up at him, drew a long quivering breath. "I'm not sorry. I never was. But it's better if we forget."

"I felt so good, me and you engaged—yeah, engaged, even if there was no ring—I wanted to put up a big electric sign to tell the whole goddam world." Excitement quickened his words. "Up there in Sing Sing I'd think of that night and I'd feel good again. In my heart I figured there'd be other wonderful nights, a million of them, once I got back. Well, I'm back, and all I want is to crawl on my belly."

There was a catch in her voice. "Honest and truly, Joey, I'm sorry."

He pulled her down on a bench in the small park they had come to. "Baby, I got such a yen for you, I could bust wide open."

She tried to get up but he grasped her arm. "Don't run

away on me, baby, like I was a leper. All right," he shouted, "you win. Who are you, the Queen of England? I'll get another girl. They're all around. Every time you look up there's a broad on the corner looking for a guy."

She began to cry softly. "Go away. Please leave me alone. Go down to the Orchard Club; you'll find girls."

Across the street, boys played kick-the-can baseball. A dog sniffed around a pump, lifted his leg and wetted, then trotted across to a garbage pile to paw at the refuse.

He pleaded with her. "Maybe I expected too much. Maybe we both did. We've been separated two long years. Let's give it a chance, Tina. Just go out with me a couple times."

"No."

Something cold clutched at the back of his throat. Tina had a beguiling softness but underneath, he knew, lay a stubborn will.

Bitterly, he said, "I came home expecting a red carpet and a band, a royal flush in my hand, the winner and still champion. All I got was mud up to here and a pair of deuces. All of a sudden my girl's in a cage and there's a big sign that says, 'Don't touch.' "

"Yes," she said fiercely, "don't touch. I once belonged here, in the neighborhood, with the yelling and the shouting and the garbage and the heat that comes up dirty from the concrete. Now I want to get away from the East Side and all its hoodlums."

"What's that got to do with the price of a marriage license?"

She turned suddenly to look at him, compelled by the sharpness of his voice. "You'll never leave the neighborhood, you'll always be one of the hoodlums looking for an easy racket."

He laughed scornfully. "Boxing wasn't exactly a racket. I sweated blood to make a dollar."

"Benny Cantor has a job for you, something right up your alley. Don't lie about it, Joey. He told me so Monday before you caught up to me near my building. I saw you two buddies discussing the job."

Joey said, "Sure, Benny had a job for me and, you guessed it, we were discussing it—but why the hell do you assume I grabbed it up?"

She looked into his earnest, hot eyes. "Didn't you?"

"I told Benny I wanted no part of him or his mob. It's true, baby, because I'm telling you so."

The tears were back in her eyes. "I'm glad, Joey, I'm very glad for you."

He grinned shyly. "Nice perfume. What kind is it?"

"It's toilet water," she said, the tears still rolling.

He kissed her savagely, a queer hurting sensation twisting his insides. "I look in your eyes," he said, "and I see rock n' roll and Benny Goodman blowing his clarinet." Holding the back of her head, he kissed her again and her lips were warm and stupefying.

"Don't, Joey, please . . ." The sharpness of tone belied the helplessness of her mouth.

His voice was thick and blurred. "You're mine, baby, all mine."

Her protest faded. "I love you, Joey, I've always loved you."

His hand shook as he caressed her face. "I need you, baby, you know that. Two years away from you, it was a lifetime. My guts are bursting. . . ."

She kissed him gently. "I missed you too, Joey . . . and I'm so full of love."

Expectation quickened his words. "Let's go. . . ."

Her eyes were shining. "Momma and Poppa went to the movies. We'll be all alone. . . . God, Joey, I'm shaking, I feel so excited . . . like the first time. . . ."

Chapter 7

There's a bearded man inside the kosher chicken store. There's nothing and nobody in the store except the man and a cackling hen with a fat red comb. Your nose pressed against the dirty window, you watch the man pull back the chicken's head with the thumb and forefinger of the same hand that clutches the white feathered body. With his other hand the man pulls short, wispy feathers from the neck. The chicken makes a sound, shrill and almost human. The man runs a knife across the throat where he's cleaned

away the feathers, then clamps the knife between his big yellow teeth. Blood spurts from the artery, splashing crimson on his dirty white apron, on his black skull cap. The man hangs the chicken on a hook over a barrel and while its lifeblood drains out of its body, the chicken flaps its wings and throws itself against the barrel.

Mr. Forrester, big, somber, appears out of nowhere, puffing on his pipe as he leans against the wall.

The bearded man looks at you and grins crookedly. You want to turn and run but you fight the swell of terror in your chest and watch him dip into the barrel and take out another kicking, squirming chicken, a big rooster. You yell to Mr. Forrester. It's Duke he's pulling out of the barrel and the bearded man is Benny Cantor. Mr. Forrester just stands there, watching, no emotion in his face. You bang on the window. Save my brother, please, Mr. Forrester. And suddenly the glass falls in and smashes into a million pieces around you.

Benny's knife flashes and the cock screams and the blood is running down Duke's throat. You try to slam your fists into Benny's face but your arms are lead and Benny's head is elusive as a bouncing football. Help, Mr. Forrester, help my brother Duke. . . . Mr. Forrester puffs his pipe and the blood runs down Duke's naked body. You scream as Benny hangs a shrunken Duke on the hook, his feet dangling inside the barrel.

Joey sat up in bed shaking, the sweat running down his face. For a few sick seconds he was still in the chicken store, seeing his brother Duke on the hook. He shook his head to clear it. What a crazy, mixed-up dream! The blood, Benny, everything had been so real. Somewhere he'd read that a dream was like watching a black-and-white moving picture; in dreams there was a complete absence of color. But they were wrong. This blood had been an ugly shade of red.

He got out of bed and sat on a chair, wiping the sweat with a pocket handkerchief he kept under his pillow. He could hear Mom moving around in the kitchen and realized Duke must not have come home. From the top of the dresser he took his wrist watch, held its face to the streak of moonlight coming through the open fire-escape window.

Three-thirty! The crazy kid. Where's he get off with that stuff, making Mom wait up for him? As she did for you,

Joey, many nights ago. That's how it always had been, Mom waiting up until everyone was home, Pop, Duke, you, then locking the door for the night.

He heard the scraping sound on the fire escape and a dark silhouette moved across the moonlight and dropped into the room. Tiptoeing toward the closet, the form clutched a package.

Joey flipped on the light. "You always take this short cut?"

Duke blinked. "Don't scare me like that. Hey, man, why ain't you sleepin'?"

Joey stared at the package, fearful of what it contained. "Why the hell you think they made doors?"

Duke gave him a brief, nervous smile. "You should talk. I learned this trick from you. When I was a kid, I used to come awake every time you'd come in this way."

Joey waved his hand in disgust. "I was a stupid kid. Don't you be like me. Go tell Mom you're home so she can go to bed."

Duke slapped Joey's back. "One week home and you're pickin' on me already. Man, you're hard."

He undressed quickly, then wearing only shorts, mussed up his red mop of hair, opened the bedroom door and went into the kitchen.

"Mom—" he sounded surprised—"ain't you sleepin'?"

Mom said, "When did you come in?"

"Me?" His chuckle was reassuring. "I been sleeping a couple hours. Came out for a drink. Hey, Mom, remember how I used to keep you up half the night bringing me water? Just a kid who wanted his beautiful Mom near him, away from Pop. I always was jealous of the old man."

"Out all hours of the night," she said, wearily. "Gallivantin' around with those hoodlums."

"Mom, how's about some coffee, just me and you? Aw, break down, Mom, this is your Dukey boy, your son. Gimme a kiss, doll."

"You're not gettin' round me this time."

Joey laughed to himself. Duke would soften her up. A little soft soap, a kiss. The yellow wrapping was loose on the package Duke had dropped on the floor. Joey opened it on the bed. Even before he lifted the cover of the cardboard box he knew by its weight and design there'd be

shirts inside. There were six, white-on-white, made of good cotton.

Duke said from behind him. "You think I got a good buy?"

Joey up-ended the box, scattering the shirts over the bed. "Must have got 'em for a song."

Smiling, Duke took the box and began to replace the shirts. "I won some dough in a crap game, so I bought shirts. You need any money, Joey? I could give you twenty."

Formless fears congealed into cold conviction. "You swiped those shirts."

Duke hesitated. This wasn't the same Joey who'd once complained about the six pairs of shoes he'd stolen off a truck only to discover they were twelve left-foot shoes and not a pair among them.

"That's a helluva way to talk, Joey. I say I bought those shirts for three bucks apiece."

Joey slapped the box. "Since when you wear size fifteen?"

Mock surprise passed over Duke's face. "Fifteen?" He flipped off the cover. "That dumb clerk packed the wrong box."

"Save the crap, Duke."

In a jaunty, mocking way, Duke bowed. "Okay, so that's how it was. You can't be particular when you break into a lot. You just grab what you can. Tomorrow I'll sell these and buy some my size. Joey, don't look at me like that." He scratched his head and groaned. "And only one week home."

Joey grunted. "Looks like I didn't get home fast enough. Now let's talk about that Police Special cannon."

"Oh, yeah." Duke snapped his fingers. "I was gonna ask you about that. Where'd you hide it, Joey? We can get forty bucks for it. I hate to sell it, it's so pretty—"

"Down the sewer, that's where I hid it," Joey cried.

"What the hell you saying?"

"The gun's down the sewer, that's what I'm saying."

Duke held his head and groaned. "That was a goddam dumb thing to do. Forty bucks, just like that. Honest to God, Joey, I wish for five minutes you wasn't my brother so I could bang a chair off your head." His breath came in a

long sigh. "It was such a beauty! Worth forty, maybe forty-five bucks."

"Sue me."

"I don't dig you, Joey. Honest to God, I can't figure you out. Here I was thinkin' when you got home me and you'd make a team. You could show me the ropes. But the minute I seen you down the club, I had the feeling there was something wrong."

Joey's insides sank. He said, "Duke, listen to me. Did I ever steer you wrong? What the hell can you make stealin' shirts? You know how much dough an aviation engineer gets? Ten grand is nothing for anybody with a brain."

Duke sat down on the bed. "That's a tough grind and it's years and years away."

Joey's hands were shaking. "I say you can make it. Someday you'll build a rocket to the moon. They talk about it but nothing's gonna happen till you come along to help 'em."

A freckle on Duke's nose stood out as he grinned up at Joey. "You're sure hopped up. Where does a dumb galoot like me get off thinking about such things?"

"Dumb! You?" Joey laughed harshly. "I wish I had your head. You got the best average of all the kids in junior high."

Duke grinned wryly. "My ninety-four average has dropped plenty in the last two years."

"Why, Duke?"

"Too much homework, not enough time."

"But plenty time for the club."

"Guy's gotta have relaxation."

Joey drew a breath, let it out slowly. "Let's you and me go all out to make your last year in high good. Then we can talk about college. I can't study for you but I'll be with you all the way. Just one year . . . then we'll see."

"Why the hell you so excited, Joey?"

"Because when you get up on that stage to get your diploma, I'm gonna bust with pride, like it was me up there. What you build, I'll be building. Duke, I missed the boat but you can make it and when you do, I won't feel like I let Mom down. All my life I gave Mom nothin' but heartaches. I want you to make up for it."

Duke laughed softly, his hand affectionately on Joey's

shoulder. "Okay, if it'll make you happy. I'll give out a little more next year. I'll try."

"You gotta stay out of trouble, no yellow sheet in the B.C.I."

"I'm clean, Joey."

"What about these shirts?"

Duke crawled into bed. "Let's say, as far as my police record shows, I'm clean. Those J.D. cards mean nothing. Every kid in the neighborhood has one on file in the precinct. Those cops start making records of kids soon as they can walk."

Joey flicked off the light. "All that bumming around is out from now on."

Duke crossed his arms over his eyes. "Tell you the truth, I don't know why I swiped the shirts. Three bucks, maybe four, is all I can get for the stuff. I worked harder to swipe them than if I'd broke into a bank."

"Kicks, that's all you wanted."

Duke stretched his arms ceilingward, yawned. "One of the gang needed a partner. I was it."

Joey lay his head on the pillow. "Maybe if you stayed away from the gang . . .

Duke sat up abruptly. "Let's not overdo it, Joey. They're my friends. You want me to sit up here and play with myself? I couldn't walk past Delancey Street without getting my lumps if the neighborhood kids knew I didn't belong to the Orchard Club. You know you got to belong. And when you belong you got to share your friends' troubles."

Remembering, Joey said, "I know how it is. You don't want trouble, so you sit around until time is lead in your ass. You get so dopey, you want to bang down a building with your fists. Anything for a change. Then somebody in the gang, more restless than you, gets spoiling for a fight or wants to turn off a store or rip the guts out of a school. One word and the whole gang joins in. But if you don't belong . . ."

"Don't worry about it. I said I'd keep clean."

Joey laughed. "Get the shirts off the bed and go to sleep, Duke."

It was quiet for a few moments, then in a burst of anger, Duke kicked the box of shirts from the bed. "A lousy three bucks. Who needs it? From now on, I'm staying clean."

If they let you, Joey thought.

There were over eight weeks of summer left and in that time anything could happen. Summer heat and inactivity would make the kids even more restless. Charlie or Pinto or another of the gang would sidle up to Duke. Give me a hand, man, help me chop up this guy who called me a dirty name, you're my pal. Or: I need dough, and I got a good deal. You gotta help me, Duke. There's a queer lush comes out of Tony's bar every Friday with a big roll. . . .

If they let him!

I'll kill the first sonofabitch who steers him wrong. . . . How will you know, Joey? While you're working in some factory, what'll Duke be doing? You can't watch him for the rest of your life. . . . Just for the summer, Joey, until he goes back to school.

Lightning flashed outside the window and a moment later hammers of rain pounded the window pane. Quickly Duke got out of bed and closed the window.

Joey said, "You don't mind us palling around for a while, till I get the yen to look for work?"

"Any special reason? This palling around, I mean."

Joey mimicked Duke's words. "You want me to stay up here and play with myself? Hell, Duke, my friends are all gone with the wind. Okay, if you don't want a ball and chain around your neck . . ."

Duke took a pack of cigarettes out of his trousers on the chair. "Cut it out. You're my brother, my best pal. I'm gonna smoke a butt in the toilet."

Joey said, "Since when you smoke cigarettes? Don't you read the papers how you could get cancer from tobacco?"

Duke laughed. "They give you papers to read up there? Okay, no cigarettes, but can I go to the toilet or will that give me something too?"

Joey watched Duke go out and shook his head sadly. He knew Duke had palmed a cigarette and a pack of matches. . . . Tomorrow he'd contact Mr. Forrester. That fifty bucks would come in handy. To watch his own brother and get paid for it was a cool setup. But if Mr. Forrester expected to buy a stool pigeon, he'd find out he was paying out money for nothing. Sure, he'd report on the progress he was making in keeping the gang in line—that would be necessary to keep the job—but that was as far as the re-

ports would go. If Mr. Forrester didn't like the arrangement, he could just fire him. . . .

As Duke crawled back into bed he said sorrowfully, "That gun sure was a beauty. I used to get a charge just looking at it. And you hadda dump it!"

Chapter 8

It was a hot muggy Tuesday in August. The sun had disappeared behind a tenement and swift dusk was dropping over the city.

Joey found Duke and the gang sitting on the synagogue steps. Charlie Patterson was in deep conversation with a redhead girl in gray corduroy toreador pants who had a shy way of looking at him. Charlie ran a long bony finger down her back and her ample chest quivered. Pinto, Bandy, Farfel and Danny were flipping a softball over their heads, catching it skillfully. Duke's girl Francine sat higher up on the steps, resting on her elbows, soft eyes watching Joey and Duke approach.

She said, "Mike and Ike, they look alike."

The tight red sweater and white skirt emphasized the shapeliness of her body, the round firmness of her breasts.

Duke swung himself up alongside her. "Where's the rest of the gang?"

Farfel ran a finger in and out of his nose. "They got one of them feasts over on Roosevelt. They went looking for something."

Joey said, "They're always looking for something. I thought we was supposed to pay basketball down at the Settlement."

Charlie took his eyes away from his girl. "All the time basketball. You drive us nuts, Joey, with that basketball. Anyway, it's too hot for anything but this." He pulled the redhead to him for a kiss, rolled over on her while she squealed gaily.

Duke said, "For cryin' out loud, everybody's watchin'."

"Let 'em learn," Charlie said, sitting up. "Once more, Elaine, and I'll be ready to take a walk with you."

Joey said, "That'll put you in condition for tomorrow's game with the Mulberry Aggies."

When Pinto laughed, there was a big gap where his top front teeth had been kicked out in a gang fight. "We coulda been havin' wars with them guys 'stead of playin' 'em softball."

With a feeling of pride, Joey remembered how he'd been instrumental in swinging a potential gang war into a series of softball games.

A few weeks before, Charlie, bursting with anger, had come into the clubroom with his redhead, Elaine, and shouted, "We gotta give it to 'em. Call a meetin' of the War Council. We gotta learn 'em to respect our women."

Instantly sympathetic, the gang gathered around Charlie. "The Mulberry Aggies," he cried, "they insulted Elaine." Joey whistled soundlessly. Nobody could insult Elaine. "What'd they do?"

Elaine, Charlie explained, had been walking through Columbus Park, minding her own business, when two boys, "Aggies" clearly marked on their sport shirts, stopped her. She had tried to get away but despite her protests they'd dragged her into the back yard of a tenement building and proceeded to paw her. She'd broken away from them just in the nick of time.

Eyes unnaturally glazed, Charlie cried, "We gotta kill every one of 'em. I'll get my brother, the cop's, gun and burn out every no-good bastard in the gang."

Pinto said, "I got a couple garrison belts and a zip."

"Wait a minute," Joey said. "Let's talk this over."

"You butt out," Charlie cried. "You don't belong in the club."

Duke said, "Shut your mouth."

Charlie shouted. "He ain't talkin' us outa this one. Maybe he's chicken, but I ain't."

Joey said, "Chicken without a head that's what you'll be. Where's Elaine?"

Chewing on her upper lip, she came out from behind Danny's big figure.

Joey said, "What you doing in Mulberry Street, Elaine?"

Her eyes were erratic. "This is a free country."

"You know some of the guys down there?"

"Course not. Can't a girl wander into a strange neighborhood without getting herself insulted? They got no right messin' 'round with somebody belongs to the Orchards."

"That's what I say," Charlie said. "No more questions, Joey. I want a meetin' of the War Council."

Joey said, "How would they know she belonged to the Orchards? They could've figured she was trying to hustle a buck."

Charlie stomped his feet in rage. "Duke, you callin' the meetin'?"

Pinto said, "They got a big gang, sixty fellers, and they can call in four other mobs, another two hundred maybe."

Danny said quietly, "I'll get my Harlem friends."

Farfel chipped in. "The whole LaGuardia gang will come with me."

Joey cried, "Wait a minute. All we need is a couple guys to talk it over with them."

"No!" Charlie said. "No talkin'. We hit 'em first."

Duke waved him down. "You ain't the War Council, you're just one guy. Okay, special meeting's called to order. I'm the parley man for this club. I say you let me talk it over with the Aggies. Vote on my motion."

Charlie said, "I vote against. No parleys."

Eyes moved to Pinto, who chewed gum, his jaws working rapidly. "Give Duke a chance," he said. "Then we'll see."

"Motion carried," Duke said.

Joey said, "Duke, I'm going with you."

"What's a matter with me?" Charlie said. "I wanna see what goes on."

Duke shrugged. "Talking isn't gonna take a lot of muscle. Okay. Charlie, Joey and Elaine."

Elaine cried, "I can't go down there again."

Joey's look was a challenge. "Somebody's gotta point out the guys who done it."

Charlie grabbed her arm. "She'll point. I don't know why we can't all go with plenty ammunition. They start somethin', boom! That'll learn 'em."

"Yeah," Pinto said. "C'mon, fellers, let's all go."

Joey said, "You voted on it, so shut up and stay here."

Charlie said, "They'll jump us, three guys and a girl."

Duke said, "They start something today, we'll finish it tomorrow."

The Aggies were involved in a game of softball on the concrete oval in Columbus Park. Charlie, Duke and Joey watched the game while Elaine searched the faces of players and spectators, looking for the two boys who had violated her. Two youths standing at the bats lined on the concrete near the iron fence eyed the visitors. Two more joined them in a whispered conference.

Elaine shifted her feet nervously. "They're not here. Let's blow."

Charlie said, "You just got here. I want those punks."

Joined by another boy, the four skirted the bats and strolled over. One, a dark-haired young man of sixteen, wore a garrison belt, the heavy buckle menacing even on his waist.

His quick eyes skipped over the faces. "If you tell us what you're looking for maybe we could help you find it."

Duke brushed at a mosquito. "We want to make talk with a couple punks who monkeyed around with an Orchard Club broad." He jerked a thumb in Elaine's direction. "The redhead."

The boy said, "You mean Elaine, Vince Barto's girl? Hey, fellers, rumble!"

In a few moments, the game forgotten, the Aggies had completely surrounded the visitors.

Joey said, "We're on a peace mission, fellers, so you put them bats away. You heard what he said, Elaine?"

Elaine cried, "I'm not Vinnie's girl—not since I moved to Orchard Street. Charlie, make him stop lying."

Two boys pushed their way through the crowd. Elaine paled, pointed. "That's them, Charlie. They done it. Honest to God. That Vince and that Woppy done it."

Vince, a rugged youth of seventeen, said, "You guys lookin' for trouble, you got it."

Joey said, "You guys don't know what a powwow is? Where the hell is your courtesy to guys holding up a truce flag?"

Duke said, "Elaine, for a stranger in this neighborhood you sure know names."

Vince said, "I got no quarrel with you guys if you want her. I got my bellyful of her, always cryin', always threat-

enin' she'd get her gang after me because I wouldn't give her a tumble."

"You're a goddam liar," Charlie shouted. "You gonna take this, Duke?"

Elaine draw a long audible breath. "I don't want trouble, Charlie. Let's forget it." She shouted at Vince, "I'll spit on your grave."

Vince threw a right-hand punch from his hips. Joey stepped in and skillfully blocked it. A murmur crept up from the gang as they moved closer.

Duke said, "All right, fellers, we had our powwow. Let's go."

Nobody moved.

Joey reached for a bat in a boy's hand. "Pitch me in a couple, I'll bang 'em out of the park."

The boy said, "You touch this bat, I'll wrap it around your ears."

Joey laughed. "I got fellers can trim you. Play us a game and we'll beat the pants off you. Hey, anybody seen my friend Steve Martin around? You guys don't wanna play, maybe he'll go four rounds with me."

In every neighborhood on the East Side, Joey knew, a prizefighter was somebody the kids put on a pedestal, somebody really special. He hoped this neighborhood was no exception. It was his only hope of getting them out in one piece.

Vince's eyes narrowed. "I seen you before. You a fighter?" Before he could get his answer he slapped his hands together. "Joey Koslo! Yeah, I remember. You beat Martin up at St. Nick's. You almost killed him."

Joey said, "Aw, Steve was tough. Pitch me a couple."

"Sure," Vince said. "Fellers, this is Joey Koslo. Let him bang out a couple. Who're your friends, Joey?"

On the synagogue steps, Charlie was still whispering into Elaine's ear, biting it to make her giggle. Joey sighed. How easy it was for a broad to handle a guy. That day after the visit to Columbus Park Charlie had been ready to slice up Elaine's face. Then she'd inveigled him into the back room of the clubhouse and the complexion of things had changed fast.

Joey swung himself onto the steps next to Duke. Francine leaned forward, the better to see him.

Coyly, she said, "Hi, Joey, gettin' much?"
"Enough."

"In your mind."

Duke said, "Why the hell you always pickin' on him, Fran?"

Joey said, "She just loves me."

Francine's eyes glittered with malice. "I'd like to love you with a bomb."

Ever since the day Joey had declined Duke's invitation to take Francine into the back room, she had shown an intense dislike for him by either ignoring him or throwing verbal barbs. In her mind she had been snubbed and it rankled.

Pinto dribbled the pink ball across the sidewalk and flipped it at an imaginary basket.

"Two points," he said.

Farfel sneered. "You never even touched the basket."

Danny took a middle course. "It rolled off the rim." He turned to Joey. "Hey, ref, call the shot."

Joey said seriously, "You missed, Pinto."

Farfel's face wore a look of triumph. "I told you."

Watching the boys horse around, Joey felt a sense of pride. Within one month he'd made so much headway in curbing their desire for dangerous activities, they seemed almost like a bunch of Boy Scouts. Somehow he'd got them to let off steam in safer directions. He'd convinced them, for instance, that instead of going chink-hunting in Chinatown, beating Chinatown's basketball team would give them a bigger kick.

"We'll beat 'em right in their own church, the True Light," Joey chuckled. "That'll get 'em sorer than if we bounced rocks off their heads."

The Orchard Club had been beaten that first game 49-47, but, somehow, tired mentally and physically, the boys were in no condition for a free-for-all fight. Instead, they challenged the True Light Church players for a game the following week and this time beat them by seven points.

But Joey had also failed a few times.

Mr. Forrester had said, "You can't change them all into angels. Some are bound to do a mugging before and after a game. Talking to someone who understands them, like yourself, does help, but in too many cases it's not nearly enough. Talk is no substitute for the money they need to pay the

rent or buy the groceries or for girls. Talk won't keep them out of barrooms where they can drink enough beer to make them feel they can lick a cop. I got three of the boys part-time jobs until they can return to Vocational School. They'll behave, within reason, but money won't guarantee they'll leave their switches home."

Barney Fencer had been arrested the week before for the meaningless stabbing of a man. Barney had explained to the police: "He spit and the wind blew his germs in my face."

Despite failures, Joey had a growing feeling of accomplishment, especially with regard to his brother Duke. Not since Joey had returned had his brother misbehaved. Of course, he wasn't with Duke all the time, but he could have bet his right arm Duke was playing it square. Sure, Duke swore and helled around with the girls and once he'd had a fight with his best friend Pinto, each stabbing the other with knives until Joey had come between them, but Joey felt that was normal behavior for a restless eighteen-year-old kid in this neighborhood.

"Hey, coach," Pinto cried, flipping the ball overhead and catching it behind him without looking around, "Danny play a better game than me?"

"You're both lousy," Joey said. "I can pick a bunch of kids from the settlement, thirteen-year-olds, learn 'em a couple extra things and they'd murder you."

Pinto tugged suggestively at his clothing. "This they'll murder. Bet I coach good as you, Joey. I pick a team and learn 'em and they'll beat the ass off your bums."

Joey stirred as an idea penetrated his mind. "You guys talk big. You'd all make great coaches. With your mouths."

Duke said, "What you showed us, we can show those kids. After that it depends on how good those kids are. It's not the coaching—"

"That's what you say," Joey said. "You guys get your teams, learn 'em, then you run a tournament and the team what wins most got the best coach."

Francine said, "Big deal. Hey, Elaine, you listening to this big talk?"

Her mouth covered by Charlie's lips, Elaine couldn't answer. Nor did she care to.

Joey said, "You guys are so lousy you couldn't learn the kids how to shoot a foul shot."

The argument became hot and heavy, Joey feeding the fires at opportune moments. Four other members of the club strolled down the street and joined the discussion.

Finally Joey said, "Why don't we stop talking and do it? We got plenty kids in the Settlement to go around for fifty coaches. Anyway, there's enough for all you guys."

Elaine said, "How about me? I can coach a team."

"Doin' what?" Pinto chuckled.

Joey said, "Each of us picks eight kids. We drill 'em and comes the fall, September, we have a tournament. Jeez, I got a idea. Prizes for the winning team and runner-up. You guys got guts?"

Duke said, "What do we do, raid the Settlement and shanghai us a couple teams?"

Joey said, "Put the names of the junior clubs in a hat. We each pick one. That way, it's fair all around. Remember, you gotta stick to the club members. No ringers. I'll talk to Forrester. Remember, he was my pal at my trial. He'll let us use the gym."

Pinto said, "And I'll get the prizes for the kids."

Farfel eyed him sidewise. "What you gonna give out, bottle caps or match covers?"

"Skates, baseballs, boxing gloves," Pinto said. "That Haber, his whole window is fulla stuff."

Joey said, "Where we gonna play this basketball, up in Sing Sing?"

"A dance," Duke said. "We could sell a thousand tickets, a buck a shot."

As they discussed the possibilities of a dance, Joey felt a warmth inside him. This was what Mr. Forrester had meant when he'd said, "Give the boys something constructive to do and you've won a big round."

He wished Tina were here now; she'd get a bang out of watching her lover boy operate. *Don't get such a big head, Joey, you got plenty to go yet.*

It was then that he saw the approaching figures crossing the gutter, Benny Cantor and Matt Green. Benny had a crooked smile on his face, his eyes looking at everyone but Joey. Green, walking with a swagger, half-concealed his harelip with his bottom one.

Cantor waved his hand. "Hi, fellers. Long time no see."

Joey said, meaningfully, "I talked to you only about a week ago."

Green said, "You butt out of this conversation, Joey."

Cantor touched Green's broad shoulder. "Don't take over, Matt, please?"

Green said, "I don't know why you listen to that guy. You sleep with him or something?" He looked up the steps, his eyes opening wide. "Blondie," he said to Francine, "don't you ever wear pants?"

Duke got up from his seat. "Keep lookin', wise guy, and you'll get somethin' in your eye."

"Lookin'," Green laughed, "never knocked up a broad."

Cantor cried, "For cryin' out loud, Matt."

Green lifted both hands in a plea. "Get them already. We can't stand here all day."

Cantor gave Joey a quick look, shifted his gaze to Duke. "We can use four kids to take a couple packages uptown by cab."

Green pointed a long finger at Joey. "And this time you don't whisper with Benny in no corner. This time we get the kids. You understand, stoolie?"

Cantor's voice was thin. "I told you I'd handle this."

Joey got to his feet, his lips dry, a sickness in his belly. "For a lobby guy," he said, "you got a lot to say."

Cantor held his arm up between them. "I want no trouble. Matt was just talking, Joey."

Green's face was taut with emotion. "I never did like the guy."

Duke laughed. "Ever since Joey busted you for talkin' out of turn."

Green closed his eyes, wincing a bit as he remembered. "I wasn't lookin' so he belted me out. Just because I said something to his girl, kidding."

Francine was now chewing bubble gun, making sharp, snappy sounds. "That girl of Joey's must have something special. She keep a lock on it, Joey?"

"Shut y' mouth," Duke said, slapping her sharply.

Cantor was troubled. "What's this, a revival meeting? Twenty bucks a man, take you one hour. What d'you say, fellers?"

Joey's lips curled. "The pay is gettin' better all the time. They gotta carry policy slips?"

Green cried, "What you gonna do, Joey, rat to the cops?"

Joey took a quick step down, swung his fist in a backward motion. Green staggered back a few yards, a drop of

blood appearing on his upper lip. He touched the spot, looked down at the red smear on his finger. The silence lengthened and grew heavy. Duke looked up over the rooftops as a flock of pigeons rose in a flurry of silver wings, high into the blue sky.

Green broke the uneasy silence with a string of blasphemy as he reached into his back pocket and came out with a knife. "I shoulda had my heater," he cried. "I'd fix you." He touched the metal button and as the six-inch blade shot out, he lunged at Joey. Quickly Joey sidestepped him, hooked his left into Green's belly and, as he doubled up, brought his right fist up from his knees. Green did a somersault, his body twitched and lay still.

Cantor was frantic. "You shouldn'ta done that, Joey. Now you're in a jam. Start running before he comes out of it. Please, Joey, I don't want cops around here. I'll talk to Matt, I'll fix it."

Joey looked down at Green and felt a savage satisfaction. "Take him out of here, Benny, before I step on him."

Green was pushing himself up to his knees, then stood erect, swaying. Blood ran from nose to chin, red droplets staining his gray tie. He stared at the knife still clutched in his hand as if it were something foreign and strange. Abruptly, he started toward Joey.

Duke stepped in front of him, In seconds the entire gang flanked Duke.

Duke said, "Put it away, Matt."

Voice thick with anger, Matt cried, "I'll kill you punks, you don't get out of my way. I'll rip you. We give you a chance to make a good buck—"

Duke said, "He's my brother, Matt."

Mean, fleshy lips turned down at the corners, Green glared at Joey for an instant, then blurted, "You know what your brother is, Duke? A no-good rat on Forrester's payroll. Remember those block workers I tipped you off on? You got yourself another. Go on, ask him."

As Duke turned to look at him, Joey averted his eyes.

Cantor had a whine in his voice. "You sure loused things up, Matt. I'm tellin' the boss tonight I don't wanna work with you."

Green said, "My ass bleeds for you."

"I'm sorry, Joey," Cantor said. "I didn't want it like this, believe me. Any of you kids wanna work I'll be at

Clinton and Delancey for the next half-hour." He took Green's arm. "Let's get out of here."

Green looked around at the gang, crouched and ready, faces stoic rather than calm. Slipping his knife into his pocket, he wheeled and hurried down the street.

Cantor said, "Don't forget, kids. Joey, no hard feelings? Come around and say hello."

He was gone. Tension eased and muscles relaxed. Nobody spoke for a full minute, then Francine laughed. "Well, what do you know? Big Shot Joey Koslo, just another paid stoolie for a do-gooder."

"Shut up," Duke said, "or I'll cut your damn throat."

Pinto shifted nervously on his feet. "I'm gonna grab me a double-ten spot. You comin', Farfel?"

Farfel shook his head. "Nah. Gotta get home early. My old man's on the warpath. Yesterday he locked me outa the house and I hadda cat out on the roof. It rained so hard I nearly drowned." He laughed but when nobody joined him, he said, "So long, guys."

Elaine said, "Charlie, we could use twenty."

Charlie said, "Yeh, twenty bucks could keep the druggist happy for a lotta weeks."

"Oh, shut up," she said, laughing.

He took her arm. "C'mon for a walk. My cop brother is gettin' tough. Yesterday, I get home after supper . . ." His voice died as they went up the street.

Face gray as ashes, Joey sank down on a step. He knew without being told that these kids who'd become his friends would now turn alien and hostile. Sweat ran down his face and darkened the shoulders of his sport shirt.

Then he noticed they had all slipped away and he was alone with Duke. Joey felt trapped, the way he'd felt when the prison gate had closed on him.

Duke didn't look at him. "You should've told me."

"What's to tell? You'd understand? You and those kids?"

"Why, Joey, why?"

"Forrester offered me fifty a week to watch over the kids. So I grabbed it, just for laughs. Imagine that sucker payin' out fifty bucks so I could hang out with my own brother."

Hurt had darkened Duke's eyes. "You earned your fifty."

"Doin' what?" For an instant his mind faltered. "What

did I . . . Duke, you know I wasn't a stoolie for Forrester. Whatsa matter with you, Duke? This is Joey. I gave Forrester no report card on the gang."

Duke stood staring. "You said your friends were gone, you were lonesome, so the guys let you hang around us. They trusted you. Hell, you were my brother. They told you things they wouldn't tell their mothers."

"So what have I done, Duke?" His stomach pulled up into a tight sickening knot. "Anybody in a jam on account of me? For cryin' out loud, Duke, I tried to help the kids. How many did I get jobs in the Settlement House? I just told Forrester some kids gotta have jobs and bingo! they got 'em."

Duke's face was blank. "What else you tell Forrester?" "Duke, for cryin' out tears!"

"What the hell you expect me to believe?"

"I told you, cross my heart."

"Fifty bucks a week! If you'd just told me."

"You kids would've chased me fast. Like them other workers. Okay, I did it, Duke, and I don't feel bad. Honest to God, I feel real good on account of I helped some of the kids. I'm only sorry you found out like you did. I don't give a damn about the others. It's you, Duke. I don't want you to hate me."

Duke rocked, miserable indecision etched on his freckled face. After a while, he said, "I don't hate you, Joey. I just feel nothing at all, like I'm numb. I can't believe it."

Joey had a creeping cold feeling that never again would things be the same between them. "Where you goin', Duke?"

Duke stopped a few feet away, turned slowly. "From now on, Joey, you got to stay away from the kids. You're not for us. Joey, I would've trusted you with anything."

Joey hesitated in bewilderment. "What I done was so bad?"

Duke shrugged. "If you don't know . . . I'm going down to Delancey and Clinton. I'm gonna grab myself a twenty. Don't try to stop me. I need the dough."

"I got a couple . . ."

Harshly, Duke said, "Every time I think of you giving me Forrester's dirty money, I feel a knife turning in my belly."

He turned and went up the street, his left leg dragging.

Chapter 9

Mr. Forrester was sorry and sympathetic. Chewing on the chipped pipe stem, he said, "You can't expect kids to understand what you did was for their good."

Joey stood shaking. "Just take me off the payroll, that's all I ask. We made a mistake."

Forrester shook his head. "We didn't, Joey. For what it was worth, we did do some good. Kids have a perverted idea of what constitutes informing."

"They're right," Joey said. "I was a phony."

Forrester laid down his pipe and took a cigarette from a crumpled pack on the table. "Not once did you report any unlawful activities to me or the police—oh, I knew they didn't suddenly grow haloes—you didn't inform once—"

"What's the use? I'm through. You want to pay me fifty a week for doing nothing? That Matt Green hadda louse it up, just as I was gettin' to those kids."

Forrester said sadly. "It isn't just Green. It's Cantor and Verde and the whole setup that poisons those kids' minds." He leaned his elbows on the table. "When they find there's no lush jobs, no promotions into the big league, those boys will think differently. I know how you can give them a fighting chance. Most of them, anyway."

Joey looked at him, said nothing.

Forrester's level gaze appraised Joey, decided he needed to make another point. "Benny's a nice guy. They're all nice. They stand on corners, toss nickels for children to fight over. They go into candy stores and order Charlotte Russes for everyone in the place. They do the same for the older boys in the bar. Sports, every one of them. Joey, they're lice, infesting anybody who comes in contact with them. They've got to be eliminated."

"What can I do about it?"

"How do you fight lice?"

"DDT."

"You could be the disinfectant."

Joey stirred, his rough features twisted in a grimace. "Tomorrow I'll get a machine gun and wipe them all out. They're a powerful mob. You don't breathe right, you're a dead pigeon."

Forrester crushed out his cigarette. "They're tough, I'll grant you that, but put the spotlight of truth on them and they'll shrivel up."

Curiosity prompted Joey to ask, "What's your plan?"

His smile took things for granted. "Accept Cantor's invitation and join the mob. Collect enough evidence and I'll know what to do with it."

"What the hell you talking about?"

"Get me the evidence, Joey, and we'll put Verde and Cantor behind bars. Take them out of circulation and we can save the majority of those kids."

Joey's expression changed from incredulity to anger. "What are you, head of the Cops' Shoefly Squad? I don't play that way. Damn it, you loused me up with the kids, now you're trying to get me a concrete casket. I don't want the promotion. I was a phony before, now you want me to go all out and become a finger man for the cops."

The smile on Forrester's face did not waver. "Call it what you like. It's a job that's got to be done for the sake of Orchard Street, Delancey, Rivington, the whole East Side. I can't get at that mob. I wish I could. I'd do anything to save those kids. And it can be done only by a severance of all contacts with Verde's mob. Rat, stool pigeon, informer—hang the names, it's the only way."

Joey's eyes and mouth became smaller, angrier. "In your hat. What the hell do I care about those kids? I should get myself knocked off for them?"

Softly, he said, "Then do it for Duke."

"Try a new line." Remembering where Duke had gone that very afternoon, Joey cried, "I'll break his legs, the stupid kid."

Forrester prodded him. "Threats won't work with him, not any more. He's in with them now, Joe—petty jobs, ten, twenty dollars. Don't look so surprised. It was going on a long time before you came home."

"Stop crappin' me, for God's sakes."

"Another year, Joe, two, and Duke will be ready for the big time."

"I'll kill him; I'll break every bone in his body."

"Will you try to save him?"

"I'll do it my way, not yours. I don't rat for nobody."

"Think it over. Meanwhile, I'll keep you on the payroll."

"I don't want it, not one stinkin' cent." Trembling, he backed to the door. "And you stay away from me. You understand? From now on I don't know you." He opened the door. "You're no good for me."

He rushed out into the hallway. Hands reached out, touched him. He shook them off, and looked up into Tjna's troubled eyes.

"Joey, what's wrong?"

Anguish and torment showed in the trembling of his lips, the shaking of his hands as he clung to her arm.

"He's no good, that Forrester. You know what he wanted me to do? I feel sick."

She kissed his cheek. "I don't want to talk about it if it's going to make you sick."

"I feel a little better; I'm with you."

She squeezed his hand, and hazel eyes smiled up at him. "Let's go for a long walk down to the dock. Bet a kiss the water is running for low."

Chapter 10

The stale smell of arnica and sweat hung like a stifling shroud over O'Leary's gym. Joey took a deep breath. To him it smelled good, clean, bringing back memories, sweet and bitter, wonderful and terrible. Many times up in prison, Joey had wished he could get one whiff of the wonderful smell now filling his quivering nostrils.

Hardly a dozen visitors had paid the thirty-five-cent admission to see the boxers go through their routine. The sandbag creaked on its iron chain while a bantamweight pounded it. The sunlight came through the window and cast golden light on the colored heavyweight skipping rope across the hardwood floors. A middleweight played a song on the light bag, grace and rhythm in every sweating

movement. Two boys shadow-boxed, huffing and puffing, spitting. The bell rang, stopping the two slugging boxers in the ring, bringing all movement in the gym to a one-minute standstill.

O'Leary, a wizened old man with a broken nose that badly needed a repair job, emptied dirt from a dust pan into a pail.

"Hi, Joey, ain't seen you in a couple weeks."

Joey stuck his hands deep in his trouser pockets. "Kind of busy."

O'Leary winked a pale-blue eye. "You come up to smell around. I know how it is."

Joey nodded. "You sure do. Pete, maybe you can do something for me. For old times' sake. I know boxing. I don't have to tell you that. You got connections, Pete. You used to have some big managers come up here. If you could introduce me—"

O'Leary sighed. "You're wasting time, Joey. Every day I get ex-pugs asking for jobs."

"I could show a new kid the ropes, fix a cut."

O'Leary lifted the pail. "The market is flooded with good cut men. The game is shot. Television murdered the small clubs and there just ain't enough fighters coming up."

"Anything," Joey pleaded. "Rub-downs, or I could spar for five bucks a round. I don't have to work for a big-time manager."

A familiar voice, rough as gravel, said, "Go over to Morris Goldin's, Joey. Tell him I sent you. He'll give you a job."

Joey turned to look at Augie Verde, a tall round-shouldered man with a flat nose and a shiny bald head. Behind Verde stood his two bodyguards. Verde's green agate eyes were cold, belying the smile on his face.

Joey said, "Hi, Augie. I was only kidding."

The spastic movement of Joey's hands betrayed his otherwise calm appearance. This was Big Augie, the Boss, big not only in stature but in importance among hoods, politicians and men in the rackets.

Verde, still smiling, said, "Don't crap me, Joey. You could use the job."

The words came out of him in a sudden burst of anger. "I don't need any favors from you, Augie."

O'Leary looked frightened as he picked up the dust pan

and broom and hurried off. The two bodyguards stared at Joey, faces immobile, showing nothing of what they thought or felt.

Verde's bushy eyebrows met in the center of his forehead. "This is no favor, Joey. Once you were a good kid so I'm paying off. I like kids who don't shoot off their mouths. Not that blowin' a whistle would've got you anything but another trip to the hospital, but you could've annoyed me to hell. I want to show my appreciation. You can work for me or for the manager with the best stable of boxers in the country."

Joey shook his head. "I didn't do it for you so you owe me nothing."

Benny Cantor coming from behind Joey said, "Crazy kid, Joey. Augie, I gotta talk to you a minute."

Verde chewed on his tongue for a moment. "No dice, Joey? Okay, run along."

"I don't want the job."

Verde cried, "Then don't take it. What the hell, you want me to apologize for offering it to you? Beat it."

Joey backed away, the anger still burning in him. Augie Verde, the man responsible for the two months in the hospital, the two years in prison, no job, nothing . . .

He saw Benny Cantor, his shoulders sagging more than usually, take a newspaper from under his arm and open it so that the big black headline was under Verde's nose. Verde pushed the paper out of Benny's hands. "Couldn't you wait till we were alone?"

O'Leary beckoned Joey from his office doorway. Joey followed him inside.

Chuckles, O'Leary said, "You got a nerve, Joey, slapping Verde's face when he offers you a job. That takes guts."

Joey said, "Maybe it takes more guts to grab his offer."

O'Leary's face was gentle. "You broke?"

Joey turned away. "I don't need a handout. Once the kids go back to school, I can get a job. Now there's too much competition, especially for a guy without a trade."

Blue eyes blinked in understanding. "All you know is boxing."

"Up in the Big House, I worked in the laundry. Maybe I could get something with a big outfit." Morosely, he

added, "I didn't like it. Used to feel all choked up on account of the steam."

O'Leary scratched his gray head. "You wanna make five, you got it. This place could stand a good washing. I got slobs comin' up here to train. Not like the old crowd. A while ago one of 'em puked all over the dressing room. I can't go in because all I gotta do is smell puke and bang, I'm throwin' up my guts."

Joey grinned. "It don't bother me none."

It took Joey six hours to earn his five dollars. Not satisfied with a lick and a promise, Joey scrubbed, cleaned and polished.

When O'Leary handed him the money, the old man said regretfully, "Wish I could tell you to come every day but these days I got trouble payin' the rent. Not like the old days. The more dirt, the better these boys like it."

Whistling tunelessly, Joey hurried down Delancey Street. It was just eight o'clock but if he dressed quickly, he could still meet Tina for their date. Tonight, he'd take her to a Broadway movie. Maybe the Music Hall.

The black headline on the newsstand caught his eye:

"COP SLAIN IN GUNFIGHT"

Joey shook his head sadly. Always shootings and killings, gang fights, robberies . . .

When he got into the house Mom was crying again. Face etched in bleak misery, she cried silently and rocked.

Joey said, "All the time cryin'."

By neither look nor sight did she acknowledge his presence.

Joey took out the folded five-dollar bill, opened it, looked at Lincoln's portrait, folded the bill twice and held it out.

"Here, Mom, you could use it."

She continued to ignore him, as she'd always done when he tried to give her a few dollars. In those days Pop was around to support her. But now . . . He shrugged helplessly. Swearing that he'd earned the money wouldn't make her believe it now any more than it had then.

He put the bill back in his pocket. "Where's Duke?"

"Don't you know?" she said fiercely. "The whole block knows."

"Knows what?"

Eyes blinded with tears, she murmured, "Down at the station house."

"Oh, no," he groaned, "not again."

Gray pallor lay beneath her wrinkled skin. Touching the metal cross on the chain, she cried, "He didn't do it. My Duke wouldn't be mixed up in no killing."

He stared in stunned amazement.

"Where'd you get that stuff about a killing?"

"One of the detectives slapped Duke. 'You're going to talk this time,' he said. 'A cop was killed. We got all your pals and one of you will talk or we'll put you six feet under.' Joey, I'm frightened. This time Duke isn't coming back."

His head aching, Joey took a turn around the room. "I don't know why you got Duke convicted before he even gets a hearing. Duke wouldn't kill nobody. Don't worry, Mom. I'll have him home in nothing flat."

He ran all the way to the Settlement House.

Mr. Forrester listened, his head cocked at an angle. From the time he said hello, he did not mention their last explosive meeting. When Joey had finished telling the little he knew, Mr. Forrester promised to help.

"I hope to God," he said, "it's just routine questioning. You go home."

Walking the street, Joey wondered, Why the kids? They couldn't be mixed up in a cop killing. Especially Duke—mischievous maybe, but not a killer by any stretch of the imagination. And why the Orchard Club? Who had pointed a finger at them?

Unless this was a general roundup and questioning of a lot of clubs and a lot of people.

The headline hit him in the face like a neon sign, blinking like a malicious eye. The *Telegram and Sun* had the headline he'd seen earlier.

The *News* headline said: "COP KILLED—HOODLUM DIES IN GUN DUEL."

Joey bought both papers, folded them under his arm and hurried home. In the privacy of his bedroom, he opened the *Telegram* with shaking hands and read the story:

This afternoon on Second Avenue and Sixth Street a detective met death in a gutter as he shot it out with two gunmen, killing one and possibly wounding the

other. From eyewitness accounts, police learned that Detective John Lanier was seen talking to two men standing near a black Cadillac. Suddenly one of the men, a short swarthy individual wearing a cap, began firing. Though wounded, Detective Lanier managed to remove his service revolver from the holster and exchange shots with the two men. The second, about thirty years of age, red-faced and wearing sunglasses, jumped into the car and ran it into Detective Lanier, knocking him down. The car then raced away. Detective Lanier died before a doctor could reach his side. The dead hoodlum, tentatively identified from a Social Security card found in his pocket as Marcus Malwin, address unknown, died instantly from a head wound. Still clutched in his hand was a Police Special Colt .38-caliber revolver, serial number 214311. Police are checking the number on the revolver in an effort to trace it.

The police theory is that the two men had intended to rob the Loew's Commodore Theatre of their weekend receipts and were stopped for questioning by the suspicious Lanier. All hospitals and doctors have been alerted. . . .

Joey flung the newspaper aside, picked up the *News*. Who the hell were those cops kidding? The two men involved in the attempted holdup weren't kids. The guy who'd got away wasn't Duke, not unless Duke had aged around twelve years.

The *News* carried additional information: The hoodlum's revolver had been traced to a shipment of revolvers to a New York licensed retailer who supplied police recruits. This particular shipment, awaiting delivery in a South Street warehouse, had been broken into five months before and an undisclosed number of revolvers stolen. Except for the revolver found in the killer's hand, none of the stolen weapons had ever been recovered.

The paper fell out of Joey's hands as he came to his feet. The bed seemed light as a feather as he pulled it away from the wall. On his knees he lifted the linoleum. The floor slat threatened to break as he forced it up. He slipped a hand into the opening, felt a surge of relief when he grasped the cloth. On the bed, he unrolled the

cloth, scooped up the revolver, flipped open the cylinder. The entire revolver was as clean and virginal as it had been the first time he'd seen it a month ago. Under the cylinder, sharply etched into the metal was the serial number: 214317.

There was no doubt that this revolver was one of the undisclosed number stolen from that warehouse.

He stared at the shiny work of art; it was a beautiful revolver. But was that any reason for holding on to it? *Why didn't I get rid of it a month ago? I forgot. Did you?* His conscience gnawed: *Like a kid with a new toy, you didn't want to destroy it.*

Carefully he wrapped the cloth around the revolver. He had to get rid of it now. This was definite and absolute. It was no longer a toy. Now it had the power to put Duke away for a long while . . . if he was mixed up in the burglary. If not, he'd have to explain to the police how the revolver had fallen into his possession and the explanation might earn him six feet of secret burial ground in a secret park by secret executioners.

From the closet he took a jacket and shrugged into it. He stuffed the bundle into the jacket pocket. The cloth sagged but that couldn't be helped. By keeping his right hand in the pocket, he could hold onto the bundle, thereby lightening the weight. Anything was better than carrying it in his hands for people to see and talk about should the police come around asking questions.

Out in the hall, he took a deep breath. He could feel the revolver through the cloth and it was hot. He laughed. An empty gun gave off no heat.

Then the babble of voices reached him. An ominous feeling crawling up his spine, he looked over the banister into the well of the staircase. Men were coming up the stairs, big men. Even before he saw the uniformed patrolmen, he knew these were detectives.

On legs suddenly weak and rubbery, he turned and went up the stairs, heading for the roof as noiselessly as he could, keeping against the wall, away from the banister. His blood pounded in his head as he turned onto the fourth-floor landing and slammed head-first into a man who had just come out of a corridor.

"Sorry," Joey mumbled and looked up into the cold

eyes of Neal Patterson, the detective brother of Duke's friend Charlie.

"What's your hurry?" Patterson grunted.

Joey forced a smile. "Just going up the roof for some air. They grab Charlie too?"

He gave Joey a scathing look. "You'd like they should put Charlie away, wouldn't you? They put you away so you'd like every decent kid to be an ex-con like you. Sure they grabbed Charlie, but they let him go. He's a good kid and I want him to stay that way. The next time I grab your stinking brother Duke near him he's gonna have two gimp legs 'stead of one. I would've done it long ago but I'm a cop and I can't get mixed up in fights."

"Wait a minute," Joey said. "What's all the jazz about? They let Charlie go, then Duke is out too. My brother's as innocent as yours any day in the week."

Patterson's eyes gleamed wickedly in the semidarkness. "They're still holding onto Duke while all the other kids are out. I wish I was in the Seventh Precinct. I'd like to work on that prize package." Hatred distorted his thick lips. "I'd like to send him away for life."

The bundle in his pocket was heavy as a ton of lead. Anger and instinct ordered him to lash out and knock Patterson to the floor. Common sense and fear of the detectives he could hear going into his corridor downstairs cooled him down.

"You shouldn't talk like this, Neal."

Patterson growled deep in his throat. "I don't like hoods. I don't like Duke, the captain of the Orchard J.D.'s. Those kids got no respect for anybody and my brother's getting like them. A couple months and we'll be out of this neighborhood for good. Until then, don't let me catch your god-dam brother even talking to Charlie."

Joey looked away. "I don't want no argument with you, Neal."

Patterson grasped Joey's arms and for a sinking moment, Joey thought the revolver would rip right through his pocket and drop to the floor.

The sweat shining on his face, Patterson said, "You're an ex-con and I don't want Charlie to get within ten feet of you."

Joey shook him off. "So what am I supposed to do?"

Patterson's eyes rolled hotly. "You could slip and fall off the roof."

Joey laughed. "I will if you'll hold my hand."

He went up the stairs simmering with anger at Patterson, ashamed of himself. An ex-con . . .

Chapter 11

On the roof he took a deep breath and looked around. A quarter-moon and a starlit sky furnished enough light for him to see the parapets and the empty water tank, big and ghostly on its steel girders. He hoped Patterson wouldn't meet the Seventh Precinct detectives who had gone into his house.

"Joey Koslo?" He imagined he could hear Patterson's harsh and strident voice. "He just went up on the roof. Yeah, he had a gun in his pocket, the one you're looking for."

He tried desperately to bottle up the panic that swept over him. Patterson wouldn't meet those detectives; he couldn't tell them anything if he did. Hell, he didn't know anything. Lots of people cooled off up on the roof. Sometimes you could have a baseball game in the street, there were so many people cooling off up here.

What do I do with the gun?

The adjacent roofs were two stories down so there was no escape that way. He thought of flinging the revolver as far as he could out over the rooftops but decided that would be foolish. Whoever found it would turn it in to the police who, upon learning how close to the Koslo building the revolver had turned up, would start asking more questions, and contacting every tenant in the building including Neal Patterson. Then the fun would start.

Joey had one foot on the ladder preparing to descend the back fire escape but changed his mind. Somebody in the lighted apartments might see him. Slowly he returned to the roof door. Maybe the detectives had left his apartment and were on their way back to the station house.

He heard a scratching noise behind the roof door and backed up, his breath running out. Frantically, he looked around. The big water tank met his eye. In split seconds he was up the steel girders, lifting the metal and wood cover, a half-moon hinged in the center. With his free hand, he yanked the bundle out of his pocket, almost tearing the cloth, and dropped it into the tank, where it landed with a thump that made him wince. Gently he lowered the lid and hopped off the girder.

Breathing raggedly through an open mouth, he waited for the roof door to open. All he could hear was a cadence of voices coming up from the street. Carefully he opened the door. Sitting on a step, busily washing its face with one paw, was a big brown cat. Joey spat angrily and the cat scooted down the stairs.

When he felt calm enough, Joey went down to his apartment.

The big patrolman standing near the window barely turned his head as he came in. Mom sat in her chair, stiff and dry-eyed. Noises came from the two bedrooms, of drawers opened and closed, of footsteps and voices.

Joey said to the patrolman, "What goes on here?"

There was abrupt silence in the bedrooms and a moment later Lieutenant Kale came to a doorway, mopping his face with a large white handkerchief.

"You just stay where you are, Joey, until I need you, and you'll be okay."

Joey pushed passed him. "This is my flat. . . ." He glanced into his room. Detective Jackson, standing on a chair, probed the top of the wardrobe closet.

Joey said to Kale, "Who are you, the Gestapo?"

Kale said, "You want to see the warrant?"

"Stick the warrant. What you looking for?"

Kale shook sweat from his face. "You didn't see Duke with a nice shiny revolver since you got home?"

"You trying to tie him up with that cop killing?"

Eyes alert, Kale said, "For somebody who's just come in, you sure know a lot."

Joey pointed. "See them papers? I can read, can't I? And you said you was looking for a new revolver."

Kale shrugged. "I did, didn't I?"

"You know Duke had nothing to do with that cop getting killed."

There was a sudden edge to Kale's voice. "When he tells us what we want to know, we'll find out just how much he had to do with it. Did you or didn't you see a revolver around this place?"

Joey said tightly, "A whole arsenal. I just got rid of it."

Kale sighed. "Ask a foolish question . . . we'll find it and when we do, he'll open up."

Jackson came out of the other room, disappointment clearly etched on his face. Chewing noisily, he said, "Hi, Joe. Say, you or your brother got any bunks?"

Eyes wide with innocence, Joey said, "What's bunks?"

There was a slow hardening of Kale's line. "Don't overplay the hand, Joey. You know what bunks are: secret hiding places."

Joey pulled at his lower lip and whistled soundlessly. "Like hiding something in a hole in a tree?"

"Or under some slat," Jackson said. "Hey, Conroy, come on in here."

The patrolman moved slowly, ponderously.

Jackson said, "Rip up the linoleum in this bedroom."

Joey howled. "Where you get off with that stuff?"

Kale pushed him toward the kitchen. "That linoleum is so old it'd come apart if I spit on it, but you send the department a bill. If they don't pay, you sue."

"You got a damned nerve," Joey shouted, but Kale had gone into Joey's bedroom and closed the door. A hard, suffocating feeling in his chest, Joey said to Mom, "There's cops for you, walk into a respectable flat and rip it apart."

Mom sat there, her face closed.

He heard them tearing the linoleum and the sound ran up his spine and lodged in his mouth. As a kid, he remembered, he'd get that same queasy feeling listening to Pop grate his teeth in his sleep, a funny kind of mild electric shock that went right through you. That was how it was now, only worse.

He wiped his sweaty hands on his handkerchief, and a moment later they were wet again.

He slammed his fist on the closed door. "Go on, break up the house. See if I care. I'd like to put a bomb right under this door and blow the whole place to hell."

The bedroom door opened so abruptly it startled him.

Kale, grimly silent, motioned with a crooked forefinger for Joey to come in.

Joey cried, "A big bill you're gonna pay, big as anything."

Kale took Joey's arm, steered him inside, closed the door. The linoleum lay piled in rough squares in a corner. The black splintered floor looked naked.

Kale said, "You're not looking, Joey."

Reluctantly, Joey lifted his eyes to where the bed had been pushed aside. The patrolman lifted the loose slat.

Jackson said, "This your bunk or Duke's?"

Joey said, "You stick your hand in there and one of the rats will take it off. You'd look funny coming back to the precinct with one hand."

"Answer my question."

Kale, flat on his belly, held a lighted flashlight over the opening. "The dust has been disturbed but if there was a gun in there it had a cover. There's a fresh crack in the slat. I think it was opened quite recently."

Joey said, "What you call recently, a month ago?"

Kale said, "Could be more recent."

Joey laughed. "Lot you know. I had a couple bucks stashed away before I took my trip to the Riviera-on-the-Hudson. I came home, I took it out. You think I been living on air?"

Kale lifted his head. "How much money, Joey?"

Glowering, Joey cried, "What's the diff? I don't have to tell you guys my business. I heisted the dough out of there. Maybe I cracked the slat. I don't know. I didn't figure I was making a federal case."

Jackson said, "Sure, kid, we understand. You shouldn't leave bills laying around in a hole. We got banks to hold our money."

Joe caught a glimmer in Jackson's eyes and something vague and undefined stirred in his memory.

Kale got to his feet and said carelessly, "That true, Joey? You put a lot of bills in that hole before you left the city and took the dough out about a month ago?"

"I left dough in there, yeah."

"You at least wrap the bills in newspaper?"

Then it came to him. Once, so many years ago it seemed like an eternity, when Pop had threatened to destroy Joey's

Orchard A.C. emblem, a circular piece of blue wool cloth with white lettering, Joey had hidden the emblem in that very hole....

Joey smiled. "You guys sure are dumb. You can't put paper money in there; the rats would eat it up. They can't read so how they gonna know they could buy a lot of delicious cheese for sixty bucks?"

Kale and Jackson exchanged glances. Jackson said, "You said you put the bills in there."

"Yeah," Joey said, "and in a tin tobacco can."

Kale said, "I think you're lying, Joey. I think a revolver wrapped in something soft, like cloth, was in that hole as recently as yesterday . . . or today. I think you knew Duke had hid the revolver in there. It's a natural thing for a kid brother to show off to his big brother just home from prison. I think you read those papers, hurried up there and got rid of the revolver."

Joey said, "You got a brain. That I gotta admit. The only trouble is it's full of horse manure."

Kale's bushy eyebrows twitched. "You should know, Joey. You're the expert. Sit on the bed and make yourself comfortable, Joey. I want some information. Start with the time you got up this morning, one step at a time until you came into the apartment a while ago. I want to know everything you did."

Grinning, Joey sat down. "Everything—even my bowel movements? Okay."

It was past midnight when the detectives, apparently satisfied, decided to leave. Kale said good-bye to Mrs. Koslo and opened the door just as Forrester was about to knock.

Annoyance and a touch of dislike in his voice, Kale said, "The hoods' father confessor is here."

Forrester said, "Never mind that. If you cooperated with the Youth Board like the rest of your department, maybe we'd get somewhere. Where have you hidden Duke Koslo?"

Jackson said, "Who?"

Forrester said, "You have no right to hold him incomunicado."

Jackson said, "Incommunicado? What's that, a Jap restaurant?"

Kale said, "Instead of worrying so damn much about

that boy, Forrester, maybe you should worry a little about the cop's widow and three kids. We'll hold the kid for questioning as long as we think necessary. You do what you like."

They went out and for the first time Joey realized something. "You're right in the middle, aren't you, Mr. Forrester?"

Forrester shrugged. "I'm used to it. The boys resent me because I interfere in their affairs, like gang rumbles, muggings and so on. The Police Department resents my interfering in their interpretation of the due process of the law. If I don't find out where they are holding Duke, I'm going to the Commissioner."

Chapter 12

A splash of sunlight lay yellow across Joey's eyes when he awoke the next morning. He sat up, rubbed the sleep out of his face with one hand, scratched his tousled head with the other, abruptly switching both hands to his naked body. He felt good, alive, ready to go three fast rounds if necessary. Then he saw the linoleum pieces piled carelessly in the corner, and the vile taste was back in his mouth.

When Forrester had left last night Mom had turned on Joey, scolding, berating, blaming him. Joey had listened, not angrily, understanding that if Mom didn't find some release for her grief she'd go out of her mind. He didn't object to being the whipping boy if it made Mom feel one per cent better. She loved Duke more than anything or anyone in the world. Joey knew that was only natural. After all, Duke had been crippled from that bus accident a lot of years—four, four and a half nearly—and all that time, between hospitals and operations, she'd watched over him in his bed, and even if she weren't his mother, she'd have to love a swell kid like Duke.

As for Joey, she had never forgiven him for taking the four-year-old Duke when he'd gone hitching bus rides.

After breakfast, Joey took an armful of linoleum pieces downstairs and dumped them into the ash can in the stair well. He turned to go up for another load when the stooped figure of Benny Cantor came toward him down the dim hallway.

Joey said, "If I was you, I wouln't talk to me. Duke's in a jam and I got a hunch you and Verde are responsible and I'm just in the mood to belt you out cold."

Cantor wasn't frightened. "When you gonna move out of this dump? Is your old lady a screwball like mine? I drop a couple big bills in her lap. Go out, Momma, find a nice apartment for you and Poppa. Furnish it any way you like. Live like a human." He sighed. "She tears up the bills and starts to cry. Two thousand bucks and it's only paper to her. I can redeem the torn bills—"

"For God's sake," Joey cried. "Somebody vaccinate you with a phonograph needle? You want me or are you just inspecting the building?"

"You know," Cantor said, "if you could write that kind of material, I could introduce you to Jackie Gleason or Eddie Cantor and they could make a comeback. I got to talk to you about Duke."

"I wish to hell I knew where he was."

"I know. He was in the Brooklyn House of Detention yesterday. This morning they brought him over to the precinct for more questioning. I got a good mouthpiece for Duke."

Joey's lips grew thin and hard. "I don't want anything from you, Benny."

"If you don't want Duke out, okay. My mouthpiece could have him out fast . . . unless Duke opens up."

"What does that mean?"

"If Duke talks, they'll hang on to him forever because then he becomes a material witness in a cop killing and no judge would issue a writ."

A hard suffocating feeling filled Joey's chest. "Maybe the kid has opened up. He ain't iron."

"Uh-uh!" Benny looked wise. "So far he's a good kid."

"How the hell you know?"

Patiently, Cantor said, "No cops've been around Verde's club."

Joey's voice shook. "So Verde is mixed up in this cop killing."

Cantor grasped Joey's arm, glanced over his shoulder at the man coming into the building. Joey could feel Cantor trembling with emotion. When the man had gone up the stairs, Cantor cried, "Forget I ever opened my mouth. I give you my word Verde is mixed up so indirectly he's a million miles out of it. Some *schnook* got coked up and done the job."

Joey said, "The guns, those stolen revolvers, that's Verde's headache."

Cantor was almost in tears. "Dopey Joey, you trying to commit suicide? Shut up, I tell you."

Joey took a deep breath, let it out slowly. "What do you want? I don't need a mouthpiece, I got Forrester's man."

Scornfully Cantor said, "A shyster. You want Duke out or you'd rather those cops kept working on him?"

Suspicion narrowed Joey's eyes. "Verde wants Duke out."

"Sure he does. The quicker he's out, the quicker the cops stop asking questions."

Joey felt a weakness in his knees. "What's to stop Verde knockin' Duke off to shut him up once the kid's outside? Don't crap me, Benny."

Sincerely, Benny said, "I shouldn't live to walk on De-lancey Street. Duke keeps his trap shut, he's safe as you and me."

Joey licked his lips with a dry tongue. "How safe are you, Benny?"

Benny rolled his head. "God, Joey, you're a hard guy to talk to, so help me. For Duke's sake, get to him and tell him he's got to be dumb. Abe Klein, my mouthpiece, will get you in to see him."

The whiteness of desperation on his face, Joey said, "If Duke talks or if he don't, Verde's got to take care of him."

Cantor clasped his head with his left hand. "Boy, you sure are a stubborn bastard. Okay, lemme put it this way. Duke opens up, he ain't got a chance to live till his next birthday. He don't talk, there's a possibility. In your mind, not mine. As far as I'm concerned Duke's clear. Verde likes good kids. Bet he rewards him."

"With a concrete coat and a bath in the ocean."

"Why should he want to kill Duke if the kid don't talk? You don't understand the situation. Verde is clear. He didn't have nothing to do with killing that cop. As far as Duke is concerned Verde knows nothing about those revolvers. So Verde ain't worried, Duke walking around with a big secret about somebody."

Joey lifted his arms in a bewildered gesture. "If Verde's not in on the revolvers, if Duke can't implicate him, what's he so hot about?"

"Because," Cantor said, "Duke can involve somebody else, somebody too close to the Boss. Enough of this crap, Joey. Man, can't you understand, if Verde hadda knock off everybody who had something on him or somebody close, he wouldn't have no organization? Figure it out. I know plenty, Matt Green knows enough, every guy near Verde could make trouble. You expect Verde to get rid of us all?"

Joey said dully, "Duke can't stay in prison forever. Sooner or later, he's got to come out and take his chances."

"Make it sooner, Joey."

"I still don't understand: Why you getting so hot about Duke?"

"You don't know by now, you never will."

"You're my friend."

"You don't have to believe it. Once I didn't act like a friend, just once. I couldn't help it, it was so useless. Just that one time you remember, forgetting all the days when we were pals."

Joey scratched his face, his bare arms. Two boys came down the stairs, raced through the hall, and Joey could hear them yelling out in the street.

"Okay," he decided. "I gotta do it. Sooner or later, that's how it's gotta be. You get Klein." His voice became suddenly thin. "Benny, if anything happens to Duke, I gotta kill you . . . and Verde."

Chapter 13

The questioning room in the Seventh Precinct contained nothing in the way of furniture except a stool and two chairs. A bright bulb hung naked on a long cord from the ceiling. The atmosphere was cool, damp. Deputy Inspector Bendix, a gray-haired man in his late fifties, stood over Duke seated on the stool.

Cold, haggard, Duke looked up at Bendix with blood-shot eyes. "I don't know what a guy's got to do to make you believe him."

Oozing kindness, Bendix said, "Just tell the truth, that's all we want. We know you had one or more revolvers you took from a crate in the South Street warehouse. Just admit that and we'll know you're telling the truth."

"That's what you been saying all night," Duke said tiredly. "All right, I had a revolver; I had ten if it'll make you feel better. I'm so exhausted I'll sign anything you say."

"We want the truth."

"No, you don't," he said fiercely. "If you did, I'd be out of here."

A door opened and Detective Lieutenant Kale came in. One look at the deputy inspector told him the story.

"Why don't you open up?" Kale said. "It'll save you a lot of aggravation."

Duke turned on him. "I just confessed. Ask the inspector. What else do you want? I swiped fifty pieces, a hundred."

"Who was with you in that warehouse?"

"Who do you like? You name him and I'll second the motion." Duke groaned, covering his face with his palms. *It's so easy to give in, Duke. You're so tired, sleepy. . . . Coffee, a sandwich, a lousy cigarette. Would you trade them for your life? Because if you spill your guts, that's what it'll cost you.*

Duke said, "Write out anything on a piece of paper,

anything you can dream up. I'll sign it. I won't be the first guy third-degreed into a confession. I can't take this beating."

"Nobody laid a hand on you."

"This is worse and you know it. If I knew something, I'd tell you. Can't you guys understand that?"

Bendix frowned, walked to a corner where he was joined by Kale.

Bendix said, "I got a feeling we got the wrong kid."

Kale said, "Don't believe it, Inspector."

"Nobody, much less a kid, could stand up to this questioning unless he were innocent."

Kale said, "You don't know Koslo. He's not an ordinary kid."

Bendix mopped his face with a pocket handkerchief. "His lawyer is over at the Supreme Court getting a writ. We haven't got a shred of evidence on which to hold him. That tip you got, how reliable is it?"

Kale smacked his lips. "A tip is a tip; you can't grade it. One of the Orchard gang, Patterson, pointed the finger at him. I promised the kid Koslo wouldn't know."

Bendix smiled grimly. "You've got to put it right up to Koslo, promise or no promise. This way we keep beating around the bush. Hit him with the Patterson story, then we'll see."

Kale frowned. "That gang will make Patterson sorry he ever opened his mouth and we won't be able to stop them."

Bendix's voice, still soft, held a different note. "A cop was killed. I intend to find out where the revolver came from. Find out who stole those revolvers and we're on the way to getting our killer."

Kale shrugged. "Patterson's got it in for Koslo on account of he thinks his girl is stuck on the redhead. Also he feels he should be the leader. I told Patterson I'd do my best to keep him out of it. I did try."

Bendix slapped his back. "You take over the questioning. I'll stand by."

Duke watched Kale move into position before him, legs astraddle, arms on hips, jawline jutting out like a marble slab. Instantly alert, Duke wasn't lulled by Kale's low soothing voice.

"You ever have a revolver, Duke?"

"A real gat?"

"Yeah, the kind that can shoot bullets."

"Nah. It's against the law."

"Ever own a zip?"

"Ain't that against the law too?"

"Not now, it isn't. What I mean is, if you once owned one and got rid of it, there's nothing the courts can do about it now. So you don't have to be scared of talking."

Wide gray eyes measured Kale with harsh, chill distrust. "I ain't scared and I never had a gun in my life, a real one, that is. Every kid had a toy gun. When I was a kid I knocked off every cop I saw with my toy revolver."

Kale said, "You don't use real bullets in a toy."

"Who said . . ."

Kale snapped. "What did you want with Police Special .38-caliber bullets?"

Duke stared blankly. "Me?"

"Yeah, you asked Charlie Patterson to steal some bullets out of his brother's supply box. Police Special .38's."

Fear had him now, his throat was cold with it, tight with it. So Charlie was the why and wherefore. He squeezed his lips with his hand to keep his mouth from quivering.

In a clear voice he said, "You're making this up. You gotta be, because Charlie wouldn't lie. I never asked him to swipe any bullets because if he did, I wouldn't know what to do with 'em."

"You had a revolver, a Police Special Colt, and you asked Charlie Patterson to get you some bullets."

"Charlie told you that? Did he tell you how I showed him the gun?"

Kale snapped. "You didn't show him the revolver. You were too smart for that."

"But I did tell him it was a police what-you-call-it?"

Kale looked very tired. "You just asked for bullets; you knew his brother used the same type of revolver you had."

Sleep tore at Duke's eyelids. "If I asked for bullets, maybe I wanted to make a charm for a chain, maybe I wanted to throw 'em in the fire so they'd go off, maybe I wanted to show off to a girl."

"Then you did—"

"Only I never asked Charlie for no bullets." Despite constant wetting with his tongue, his lips remained dry.

"You think I did, put that in the confession too. Inspector, you gonna get him off my back."

Bendix scowled fiercely and walked back to the corner where he was again joined by Kale. They stood there, heads down, thinking. Finally Bendix said, "The Patterson boy could have been lying."

"What's he got to gain?"

"Get even with Koslo, make him suffer. I know, it sounds weak, but other kids have done it. That boy sounds sincere."

"Not to me," Kale said. "Koslo's brother and mother are outside waiting to talk to him. I suggest we let 'em. I'll put the bastard in Room Six. Maybe we'll learn something."

Bendix didn't seem to like the idea. "Remember the stink raised the last time we tried to use that kind of recording in court? The papers raised hell, and the defense attorney's speech about invasion of privacy got the case heaved out the window."

Kale had an oddly fixed look about his eyes. "Who says we gotta use the recording in court? I just want a couple words out of his mouth that I can hit him over the head with."

Bendix's voice was guarded. "All right, go ahead. But I think we're making a mistake. . . ."

Wearing a set of earphones, a shirt-sleeved detective sat hunched over a recorder. Another plain-clothesman sat facing them. Kale stood staring at the speaker on the table, hate and loathing in the back of his dark eyes as Duke's voice came clearly through.

"Mom," Duke said, "would I lie to you? Those cops got it in for me, that's the only reason I'm here. I don't know who killed nobody, I never had a revolver, I never done nothing serious enough for them to keep me here. You think they don't know it?"

Mom's voice was full of tears. "If you stayed out of that club, you wouldn't be here. That club got you a reputation and for that reason every time something happens you get grabbed."

Joey's voice sounded tinny over the speaker. "Cut it out, Mom, always cryin'. Duke didn't do nothing. Soon's Klein gets back from the Supreme Court, Duke will get out. Don't worry about it."

"That's all you say," Mom cried, "don't worry, don't worry. All the time policemen in the apartment. I'm so ashamed to go out, I'm like a prisoner in my own home."

Kale sighed deeply. "He'll never open up as long as his old lady's around. Rawlings, get her out so the boys can be alone."

The plain-clothesman slipped a Chiclet between his tobacco-stained teeth and went out of the room and across the hall. To show he was not interfering in their private conversation, he knocked before entering. Three heads turned as one to look up at him.

"Mrs. Koslo," he said, "could I talk to you for a minute?"

"No," Joey said.

"Just a few questions," Rawlings said. "She'll be back in a minute."

A tear rolled down her cheek. "Why don't you let me take my boy home?"

Rawlings stopped chewing. "Maybe I will—after a couple questions."

"Mom, don't go," Joey said. "They can't make you."

Wearily she got up and followed Rawlings out of the room.

Joey's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "What could Mom tell 'em?" He got up, a finger across his lips in a warning sign, and moved quickly around the room, searching under the table, behind the cold radiator.

Duke watched and smiled shrewdly. "Poor Mom! You see what this is doing to her? And for nothing. The cops know I never touched a revolver in my life but they got me in here and won't let me out."

Joey stepped back, the better to see the molding. "I know and you know you done nothing, but those cops gotta be sure. You can't blame 'em. They ain't bad guys—" he saw Duke's lips curl in disdain, and smiled—"but they got a job to do."

Exhaustion twisted Duke's mouth and fatigue stabbed the muscles in his shoulders. "How the hell you gonna make 'em believe you?"

"I don't know," Joey said. "Just keep telling 'em the truth; maybe it'll penetrate the inspector's head."

"Meanwhile," Duke said, "I gotta take a beating. Joey, I offered to sign a confession, anything just to get into a

bed for a night's sleep. They had me all over town, headquarters, Brooklyn House of Detention, here, and they wouldn't let me sleep. Joey, the next time they ask me, I'm gonna confess."

"Don't be crazy."

"I gotta," Duke said, winking broadly. "So they'll send an innocent kid to prison. . . ."

In the recording room, Kale cried, "Okay, shut the garbage off. We're wasting our time."

The detective at the recorder flipped a button and the two wheels stopped rotating. "You think Koslo's innocent?"

A combination of perplexity and anger in the back of his eyes, Kale said, "I don't know. That Joey Koslo looks like a dummy, acts like one, talks like one. But he's a cutie from way back. As for Duke Koslo, he's either got more guts than any eighteen-year-old kid I ever came across or he's really clean."

"The inspector gonna let him go?"

He laughed quickly to hide his disappointment. "What else can he do?"

Chapter 14

That night you toss and turn in your bed but sleep won't come. You should be relaxed with Duke snoring softly beside you instead of in some crummy jail but every time you close your eyes the vision of a Colt .38 fills your eyes, blinking like a neon sign. Up there in that tank is the evidence that can take Duke away.

So you lie in bed and your head whirls with plans and ideas on how to get that revolver out of the tank and into the river. And no matter how you figure it, one thing you know: Somebody's got to give you a hand because once you get inside the tank you'll need help getting out.

Maybe in the tank you can stick the gun in your waistband, go back to take the short run, grab the top of the splintered wood and pull yourself out. But you're afraid the tank is too old and rotted and you're liable

to pull half of the wood back inside with you when you jump and half the people in the building will come running. And suppose you can't jump high enough to grab the top; what'll you do, holler for help?

You roll and toss and turn and you think of giant magnets and fishing poles and wires with hooked ends, and when daylight starts coming through the window, you got no choice but to wake up Duke and tell him the score.

He sits up in bed, scratching his red head, no surprise in his handsome face as if all along he knew where you'd stashed the piece.

Then he gets dressed and despite the muggy heat pulls a leather jacket out of the closet.

Up on the roof he wants you to go into the tank; you're lighter, he explains, and he can heist you up whereas you might have trouble lifting him. You listen to him and even though you can't see it—Duke is taller and he'll find it easier getting in and out of the tank—you do it his way.

You kick aside some busted bricks lying under your feet and hop up on the steel girder. Duke gives you a little boost and the hinges in the center squeak as you fold back the half-moon cover. In a second you're over the top hanging inside by your fingertips. You drop, and a million bugs and spiders start to run, as the dust and rust from the metal cover you with a fine coat. You can't stop laughing as you pick up the chamois cloth and the revolver.

Duke whispers for you to heave it out; then it'll be easier for you to get out. You don't know exactly why but you hold onto the bundle as if you're afraid he'll run off with it. When he taunts you and tells you exactly what you're thinking, you feel ashamed so you throw out the bundle and it gets so quiet for a while you wonder if your first fear wasn't right, but after an eternity you see Duke's grinning face over the top of the tank, looking down at you.

All the way down to the pier, through deserted, desolate streets, Duke carries the package under his coat. You see a blue-coated cop and you're scared. You want to take the bundle away from him and run up a building but the kid laughs and goes right past the cop and no

matter how you plead he insists it's his gun and he's got a right to dump it.

You think: Duke doesn't want you caught with the firearm and maybe sent back up the Hudson with a tough rap as a second offender, and you feel good.

At the end of the pier, jutting out like a big finger into the river, you watch while a tugboat pulls a coal barge downriver. Then Duke takes out the bundle from inside his jacket, holds it for a second. You can't figure it out but all of a sudden you get the feeling there's no revolver inside the chamois cloth. Maybe somebody climbed into the tank and swiped it. Maybe Duke . . .

Standing on the stringpiece, he drops the bundle. In the air it starts to unwrap. The water fountains up in a splash as the bundle disappears from view. You stand there, an uneasy feeling inside you; then the chamois cloth comes up by itself and floats away.

You breathe a long sigh of relief and the uneasy feeling disappears. Now the evidence is gone forever.

Duke, coming out of his apartment, almost bumped into Charlie Patterson on his way up the stairs. In the semidarkness of the landing, Duke's blue eyes looked dark and hard.

Charlie held out his fist. "I been looking for you. Guess what I got for you."

Duke shifted his feet, said nothing.

Charlie opened his hand. Six bullets lay exposed. "For you, Duke. My dopey brother'll never know they're missing. He don't know he's alive. What a creep!"

Duke slapped at the hand, the bullets flying out, scattering over the landing and stairs. Venom in his voice, he said, "The cops put you up to this, trying to prove I got a burner."

Charlie looked at him with arrogant resentment. "What you talkin' about, Duke? Me work with cops? What's got into you? Lately, you hardly talk to me. The fellers must be wonderin'."

"You want me to tell 'em my friend Charlie Patterson is a no-good squealer? You sicked the cops onto me. You wanted a cop medal . . . or maybe you wanted to take over the gang."

Charlie's nostrils flared with an angry fighting fear. "I never ratted on nobody in my life."

Duke spat dryly. "The cops got big mouths; you can't trust 'em. They told me you tipped them off about those slugs."

Charlie caught his lips in his teeth, biting them. "You gonna believe those cops or me? I didn't mean—Duke, I'd cut my tongue off first."

"I can do a better job."

He gave Duke a frightened look out of his dark eyes. "Those cops ask questions and you get all sick inside. Not scared, just sick. They screw you up and put the words in your mouth you never said. I don't know how, I hardly remember saying anything, but all of a sudden they figured you'd asked for some slugs." He stopped, gasping, as if he'd spoken too much. "I didn't say nothin', Duke. Look, man, you're a regular guy. The best friend a guy ever had."

The crude flattery of the desperate boy made no impression on Duke. "I did a lot of sweatin' on account of you, Charlie. You're gonna sweat a lot more. I'm not tellin' the gang, not yet. You'll wait and sweat, wondering when, and then all of a sudden, they'll pounce on you and kick your brains all over the gutter. Then you'll know why."

Charlie wiped his hands on his dungarees and backed down a step, then, remembering the bullets, knelt in the darkness to search for them. Duke's shoe caught him on the side of the mouth, sending him rolling down the flight of stairs. As he got up, an unintelligible curse came sobbingly out of his bloody mouth.

"What'd I do?" he pleaded. "Duke, listen . . ."

Duke's voice was impatient and rasping. "You had it coming and you know it. Now get out of my sight. Remember: When I'm good and ready, I'll tell the fellers."

Charlie turned and, sobs escaping his bruised lips, ran down the stairs. Duke stood there for a long minute, then bent to pick up the bullets.

Chapter 15

Tired, Joey came down the stairs one at a time. All day he'd worked at the Klaus Window Shade Company lifting packages of shades and oilcloth onto a large scale, slapping on the proper amount of precanceled stamps, then heaving the packages into a hand truck for delivery to the post office. Now, after dinner, he was going to see Tina.

Benny Cantor, on the main-floor landing, stood looking up at him. Switching the unlit cigar to the other side of his mouth with just a flick of his tongue, Cantor smiled. "My, you sure look like they're breaking your hump."

Joey grunted. "I like it. I'm back in school, learning stuff. All the time the postage is different on account of cities are in different zones and the bundles weigh different. In one week, I learned so good, I can slap on the stamps without looking up how much on the charts."

Cantor, following Joey to the street, had admiration in his voice. "You're no dope, Joey."

Joey looked up at the gray, empty sky. "Aw, you say that because it's true. Where's your shadow, Matt Green?"

Cantor took the cigar out of his mouth, flicked imaginary ashes. "That's why I came to see you, Joey. One of Verde's guards got jammed up, so Matt took his place. I can use me a good man. For cryin' out loud, Joey, you gonna break your back in a lousy window-shade place?"

Joey ran a finger along the scar tissue over his eyes where it itched. "I got a date with Tina. Don't spoil it."

Cantor groaned. "You sure are a stubborn bastard. I need you, Joey. I know you, I can trust you, but I ain't gettin' down on my knees. I asked you, that's all. No beggin', not for a sweet job payin' a hundred and a quarter."

Joey glanced at his wrist watch. "See you around, Benny."

Cantor shook his head sadly. "I told you, I ain't beggin'. I would've liked you and me together, a team, like old

times. By the way, Joey, you seen Duke around?"

Joey took two steps away from Cantor, stopped short, his head coming around in a slow stiff turn.

Cantor said, "I just wanna talk to him."

"It better be nothing important."

Cantor shrugged helplessly. "For cryin' out loud, Joey, I got a legit job to hand out. Why not Duke?"

The tautness of anger grew in his throat. "You got no legit job; that's not the way Verde does things."

Cantor flung his cigar into the street and watched a truck roll over it. "I got nothing to say, Joey. Verde wants me to get somebody I can work with, somebody with guts and a tight mouth, somebody who won't get into scrapes. I asked you first, Joey. You got your own ideas. Okay. I got to get somebody else. It's that simple."

Voice cold, metallic, Joey said, "I told you before, Benny, keep Duke out of your affairs. The kid's going back to school next month. I don't want anything or anybody changing his mind for him. He's clean, Benny, he's behaving himself, so lay off."

Amusement skinned across Cantor's widened eyes. "Duke behaving himself? So what's the harm if I tell him how Verde likes him and I like him?"

"You go near that kid and I'll kill you."

Cantor shook his head in disbelief. "You won't kill anybody, Joey, not you. I'm just doing a job. I get paid to jump every time my brother-in-law snaps the whip. Suppose you stop me from getting to Duke. Where'll it get you if Verde figures Duke's got the stuff to be somebody in the mob. Verde just crooks his finger and Duke is in. You can't stop it, Joey; nobody can, believe me."

Joey stared, comprehending, but not admitting it. "Who the hell is Verde—God?"

Cantor sighed. "Let's say God's assistant, on account of Augie's got a boss. Someday he'll move up, then he'll be God. I gotta go now."

Hoarsely, Joey shouted, "I'll stop Verde; I'll rub him out, then maybe he won't be God's assistant."

Cantor laughed. "Holler louder, maybe Augie will hear you."

Joey's eyes burned with anger and the fever of hopelessness as he watched Cantor go off in the direction of the Orchard Club.

No-good rat bastard. I'll kill 'em both, then maybe they'll lay off Duke. A million kids in New York and they gotta pick on my brother. Forrester was right. People like that you can't respect. Wipe 'em out like roaches, before they spread their disease over the whole goddam world. I should've busted Benny, kicked him around. . . .

How many other Bennys can you kick around before Verde's boys get to you, Joey?

He turned and ran back through the hallway, took stairs two at a time, bursting into his apartment and bedroom with such speed Duke barely had time to lift his eyes from where he was counting money on the bed.

"Take it easy." Duke pulled a cigarette out of his mouth with one hand, scooped up the money with the other. "You could give a guy nervous prostitution."

His laugh at his own humor was cut abruptly short as Joey yanked the cigarette out of his mouth, flung it out the window. "I don't want you listening to them, Duke. They're no good. You hear me, Duke? You stay away." His gaze dropped to the bills in Duke's hand. "That's a lot of dough."

"Twenty bucks is a lot?"

"I saw a couple twenties. Guess I'm blind."

"You sure are. I made it in a crap game."

"You cut the game?"

"I won. What were you hollerin' about?"

"That Benny's got his nerve all right. He wants you to get yourself killed. You're too smart for that."

Duke tried to show disinterest. "How, Joey? How's he planning to get me killed?"

"He's got one of his stinkin' jobs for you, his bodyguard or something. A guy wants to knock off Benny—and there must be plenty—you get it first."

Duke had stopped hearing Joey after the first sentence. A smile of satisfaction on his face, he said, "So they're finally coming through with a job. It's about time." He shoved the wad into his pocket, went to his clothes closet and removed a sport jacket from the hook.

"Duke," Joey shouted, "you listenin'?"

"Talking never hurt anybody."

"I'm askin' you not to go near those bastards."

Duke turned angrily. "I want that job, Joey. I gotta have it."

"Why, for God's sake; we're living okay."

Duke laughed harshly. "Maybe you, Joey, not me. Look at this dump. This is living? I can make a big bundle with Verde, I can get us out of here—you, me, especially Mom. Isn't it about time one of us did something for Mom? You and your forty bucks a week . . .

"I'm sorry, Joey, I didn't mean it like that. At least you got us off home relief."

Joey blocked Duke's way to the door. "What the hell makes you think Mom would move out of here once she knows where your money comes from?"

Duke's face expressed a shrug. "Then I'll do it just for me, for all those years I sat in that bed, a lousy cripple, without a dime because the jury wouldn't decide in my favor, a penniless cripple looking at four walls, eating crap, sleeping in crap, nothing but pain. For all those years, Joey, I gotta make it up to myself. This is my chance. I'm not missing it."

He passed Joey, who made no effort to stop him, and slammed the kitchen door going out. Joey sat down on the bed, all the energy drained out of him. Forrester was right. The man had it straight all the time. . . . Suddenly the idea that had been forming vaguely in his mind crystallized.

Standing outside the two-story building, the smell of the fish market heavy in his nostrils, Joey had cooled down sufficiently to realize that toughness with Augie Verde would get him nothing but a quick boot out of his office. With Verde one couldn't even raise his voice if he wanted a favor. Augie liked guys who got down on their knees, and as far as Joey was concerned if that would keep Duke out of the mob he was ready to genuflect for the next solid hour.

At the top of the long wooden stairway a man stood looking down, ice-blue eyes drilling through Joey as he came up.

Joey waved his hand and in a dialect said, "Hi, Tris, how's by you?"

Tris Kaufmann chuckled and in a thick accent said, "For a punchy prizefighter, a pimple on your nose, you got plenty jokes." He mimicked Joey, "How's by you? That you learned in school? You lookin' for somebody special?"

"Verde. He's special."

"You know how busy Augie is? Don't ask. He's makin' reports out for his boss and when Augie makes reports, from him you should stay away but good." He sighed, pointed to a man standing in front of a closed door like a sentinel on guard. "Tell Pat Hingle it's his headache if he lets you inside or if he don't. So worried you look! Me you passed? Half the fight you got won."

"It's the other half that worries me."

Pat Hingle chewed gum, rocking back and forth, while Joey made his request. Frowning, he looked over Joey's shoulder to where Kaufmann stood grinning.

"That heathen," he said, "got his nerve. He shoulda chased you. Nothing personal, kid. He knows the Boss can't see nobody now."

Joey gave him an apologetic smile. "I know that, Pat. You think I'd bother Augie if I didn't know I was doing him a favor? Go tell Augie it's me."

"I can't, Joey, honest."

Joey rolled his shoulders. "You don't tell him, I'll just have to bring it to his attention I'm here. If I belt you, Pat, you'll make enough noise to bring Augie in here, I'll bet. Nothing personal, Pat."

Hingle scratched his head, one eye closed. "You always was a crazy guy, Joey. If I told you I'd cut your heart out . . ." He shrugged. "That wouldn't stop you, would it? Wait a minute."

He put his hand behind him, pushed open the door, slid through the narrow opening he'd made. He returned as silently and quickly as he'd gone.

"Go on inside, Joey."

Two men sat on a couch near the window, Matt Green and a heavy-set man Joey'd never seen before. Matt didn't look up, as if the task of filing his nails commanded all his attention. The heavy-set man's eyes never left Joey as he approached Verde at the large square mahogany desk.

"C'mon, Joey," Verde said, dropping his ballpoint pen on the yellow papers and leaning back in his chair. "Make it snappy."

Joey glanced quickly at Matt Green, returned his gaze to Verde's rugged features. "It's Duke," he blurted out. "Well?"

"Joey shifted his feet. "Benny wants Duke working for him."

Verde frowned. "I didn't know Benny wanted Duke. You're the guy he was after and I gave my okay because anybody that can grab fifty a week out of Forrester for doing nothing has got a brain."

Matt Green lifted his head. "Sorry I pulled that on you, Joey. You gimme no choice, screwin' around those kids. Duke told Benny you was playin' Forrester for a sucker. Says he knew about it all the time only you couldn't tell the kids on account of they wouldn't like the idea."

Verde said, "We knew you didn't make any reports to the cops or anybody. The hell with that. About Duke . . ." His eyes narrowed shrewdly and a smile lurked on his lips. "If Benny wants Duke . . ."

"He's a kid; he's nothing."

Verde lighted a cigarette and smoked in short, violent puffs. "He's a good boy, Duke is. Eighteen, isn't he?"

"Augie," Joey pleaded, "you blind or something? Take a good look at Duke. A snotnose kid whose ass you gotta wipe all the time or he dirties his pants. He's not for this mob."

Verde studied the cigarette ash, flicked it toward a tray, missed. "Benny needs somebody he can trust."

Anger burned in Joey's eyes. "I won't take it, Augie. Duke don't belong in this setup and you know it. I won't stand by and let Duke step in over his head."

In a voice as coldly impassive as his face, Verde said, "You talk too much, Joey."

"How should I talk?" Joey cried. "Put yourself in my place. This is my kid brother we're talking about. A baby just out of diapers and that Benny, my pal, won't listen to me. He wants Duke and he's taking him and I'm supposed to do nothing about it. He's wrong, Augie; that Benny is cockeyed wrong."

Verde sighed, killed the cigarette in the tray. "I guess I don't blame you, Joey. I've been shut out of deals, years ago when I was a kid. You're sore because Benny grabbed Duke when it should've been you. You think you should have the job instead of Duke."

The nail filing sounded loud in the sudden stillness.

Joey stared at Verde, licked his lips, anguish swelling and mushrooming inside him. So he had a choice. Either he or Duke could join the mob. One, not both . . . Even if he blocked out Duke now, sooner or later, he knew in his heart, Duke would come in too. Unless . . . unless he could stop them.

"Sure," Joey said, a queasy feeling in his stomach, "that's it. How's you feel if a kid brother grabbed what was yours? Benny offered me the job and before I got a chance to say okay, he goes running for Duke. What the hell, Augie!"

Verde winked shrewdly. "Sure I know, Joey. Matt, I expect Benny any minute. Leave word outside I want to see him."

Not looking at Verde, Joey murmured his appreciation.

Verde took a fresh cigarette out of the pack, his cold eyes on Joey. "I don't have to tell you, Joey, that from now on, what you see and hear is so secret it could cost you your heart if you forgot."

Scornfully, Joey said, "That you gotta explain to me, Augie?"

"Just a reminder," Verde smiled thinly.

Matt Green returned, Cantor behind him. "Benny was waitin' outside," he explained.

Cantor stared at Joey, wondering. "Boss," he said to Verde, "I wanted to talk to you."

Verde lighted his cigarette. "You want Duke Koslo to work with you. I know. I got reliable information."

Joey said, "I thought you was my friend, Benny."

Cantor blinked. "I don't get it. Boss, what goes on?"

Verde blew smoke. "Joey's working with you."

Cantor exploded. "I asked the crazy bastard—"

Verde said, "Let's not go into that. He wants the job, he's got it."

Cantor took a cigar out of his pocket, stuck it into his mouth without removing the Cellophane, then, realizing, flung the cigar away. "That's very nice, Boss. You know I wanted Joey. So now I got him I should sing or something, but what the hell do I tell the kid; he's waitin' outside."

Verde shook his bald head. "Can't you take care of a minor detail like that? You guys sure can get helpless. Okay, call the kid in. Matt, get him."

Cantor waved Green away. "Lemme do it."

He went outside and after a minute returned with Duke. Duke's quick blue eyes skipped over the gathering, lingering an extra moment on Joey's fixed smile.

"Hi, fellers. Augie, here I am ready, willin' and able." The heartiness in his voice could not hide the suspicion and the concern.

Verde said, "Benny shouldn't have made it definite. After all, I run the hiring and firing. If Benny'd asked I could've told him you're not ready yet, Duke."

Face contorted in frustration and defiance, he said, "I'm as ready as I'll ever be." He turned on Joey. "You fixed it, didn't you?"

Before Joey could answer, Verde said, "I do the fixing around here, or didn't you understand me?"

Duke nodded in Joey's direction. "But you listened to him first. I'm not a kid, as he's probably been telling you. I'm eighteen."

Verde's eyes narrowed. "When I was eighteen I'd got myself pinched four times, once for burglary, once for robbery with a gun and twice for manslaughter. I beat every rap." He chuckled, running a broad hand over his shiny head. "I got a big mouth myself sometimes. Duke, I couldn't take you on just now because you're still mixed up in that revolver business." He held up his hand like a traffic cop, stopping the hot words on Duke's tongue. "Let's not argue the point. The cops are still smelling around you, the newspapers are still blowing hot. The D.A. is getting a special Grand Jury together. Sure as hell, you'll be called to testify as to what you know. Maybe me too. How's it gonna look if the cops find out you're working with Benny, a known member of my organization?"

In a harsh tone of rage, Duke said, "If you're looking for excuses, you'll find plenty for not taking me on. The cops don't have to know I work for you—"

"That's enough out of you," Verde said, rising from his seat. "Now run along."

"I'll be back," Duke said fiercely. "Next month, next year, I'm coming to work for you." He pointed at Joey. "And this brother of mine won't stop me."

"A kid," Joey cried, "a baby still suckin' titty."

Duke said, "Where you come in on this, Joey? You wouldn't be the one taking my place?"

Verde said, "Benny and Joey are old friends."

Duke said bitterly, "I shoulda known. I'm a kid, I don't belong. You, Joey, you belong good. You and your fancy speeches. Go to school. Be an engineer. Be somebody big who gets himself ten grand a year."

"Shut up," Joey said. "Augie, tell him to shut up."

Amused at the spectacle of the brothers snarling at each other like animals ready to join battle, Verde said nothing.

Duke said, "Joey, I never woulda believed it. Hell, I used to look up to you like you was a god. Sure you're a god, only you got lead feet. Big speeches, then you run behind my back and grab what's mine. You fixed yourself up good, Joey, didn't you? You're in while I'm out in the cold."

Joey's left eye twitched. He ran his fingers over it but the twitching continued. "Sure," he said, "that's what I done, fixed myself up good. . . ."

The following Saturday Joey was in his bedroom dressing for his date with Tina when Duke came in. Joey called a greeting but, as if he hadn't heard, Duke went to his closet, took out a pair of slacks, draped them over the chair. Joey fumbled with his tie. All week Duke's bitter silence had torn at his insides. Joey slipped into the new sport jacket he'd bought specially for this date, his eyes never leaving Duke's brooding face.

Finally, unable to stand any more, Joey cried, "You gonna stay mad forever? What did I do that was so bad?"

Duke, sitting on the bed, didn't turn around. "I ain't mad. I like it this way on account of if we don't talk you can't butt into my business."

"A guy can't give his kid brother a little advice?"

"Not me, Joey, I don't need advice."

"Big man!" His hand on the door knob, Joey stopped, frowning. "Maybe you and Francine'd like to go on a double date with me and Tina?"

Duke's lips curled. "When I play around with a broad in the balcony, I don't need witnesses." His head came around and he looked up at Joey, the anger all gone. "Thanks, anyway."

Joey pulled out his wallet. "Maybe you're short, Duke. I can give you twenty; more if you want."

Tapping his head, Duke cried, "What'sa matter, it bothers you up here?"

Joey shrugged and said honestly, "I don't feel good about grabbin' that job. Oh, I ain't sorry, but I ain't exactly singin' about it."

Duke stared, then his face split in a grin. "That's my Joey. I guess I had no right getting sore. It was your job all the way down the line. Not that I don't wish I had it."

Joey held out his wallet. "Take what you need. Please, Duke."

Duke considered Joey's offer for a few moments. "What I said goes: I don't want you always buttin' into my business."

"Take thirty; if you need more, I ain't moving out of here."

Duke reached for the wallet. Softly he said, "Anybody ever tell you you're a crazy guy, Joey?"

While Joey was dressing for his date, Tina was finishing up a letter for Forrester. Disturbed at what she was about to tell him, she tried to hurry the typing and for the third time in a minute jammed her forefinger between the metal keys.

"Damn!" she cried, kissing the injured finger.

Forrester's big figure, hunched over a batch of correspondence on his desk, moved ponderously out of his chair. Automatically picking up the cold pipe, he slipped the stem into his mouth.

"Why don't you go on your date while I finish up?"

"No," she said, not looking at him. "It's the last letter." Chewing on her lower lip in earnest concentration, she erased the mistake, moved the carriage back a space and hit the correct key.

"Something's bothering you, Tina," he said, sitting on the edge of the desk. "Anything you want to tell me?"

She hesitated a moment, then sighing deeply, leaned back in her chair. "I'm giving you my notice, Mr. Forrester. I'm quitting as soon as you can replace me."

The pipe almost fell out of his mouth. "Quitting? Tina, I don't know what I'd do without your help. Any special reason?"

Her gaze didn't waver. "I don't think you'll want me to work for you after tonight, so I'm quitting before I'm fired. Mr. Forrester, I'm going to get Joey to quit Verde."

The thick eyebrows jumped. "Oh, no!"

"I'm frightened, Mr. Forrester. Last night I lay awake thinking and this morning I'd made up my mind. Joey is in terrible danger. If Verde finds out what he's up to, there'll be another corpse floating in the river."

He dropped his pipe on the desk, crossed his big arms over his chest. "Tina, I don't want to minimize the dangers involved but lots of men gambled with their lives to make this country what it is, and helping our kids become good citizens is working for the best kind of cause."

She smiled wanly. "The words sound noble, Mr. Forrester, but somehow they don't impress me. I'm sorry. Too many of those men you talk about paid with their lives. Before that happens to Joey, I'm getting him out of that mob."

The slate-gray eyes narrowed. "Nothing's safe in this world. Walking in the street, a man can get killed. A few years ago people in an office were killed by a plane crashing into their window. I feel Joey's chances of getting hurt are as remote as that plane crash."

"Oh, come now, Mr. Forrester."

The powerful shoulders lifted in a shrug. "So I exaggerated a little. Tina, I feel whatever risk Joey is taking is worth it if he can save one boy—"

She clapped her hands to her ears. "If I hear that again, I'll blow my stack. I'm sorry." She relaxed wearily. "I just can't get concerned over those hoodlums, not when Joey's life is at stake." She cried, "I hope you don't blame me, Mr. Forrester, but no matter how you feel, I've got to do what's right for me. Oh, it isn't only what could happen to Joey physically. Morally, he's in just as great danger. That's my second fear, that Joey will change."

"Change? Joey? I don't understand."

Tartly, she said, "I think you don't want to understand. Mr. Forrester, suppose Joey doesn't come through for you? Suppose he does not inform against that gang? You don't know him, Mr. Forrester. I do. It's my opinion Joey never will turn informer."

He smiled gently. "I've thought of that too. In fact, I've got a ten-per-cent reservation mingled with my ninety-per-cent confidence in Joey."

"Only ten per cent? My figures are vice versa. Mr. Forrester, last night Joey had a pocketful of money. Like a kid,

he took it out, looked at it, put it back in his pocket—several times during the evening. Joey's had so little in his lifetime, the money lifted his head high. He spoke of buying me a big diamond ring and when I told him he could buy it with money he earned after he'd quit the gang, he looked puzzled. He couldn't understand why I didn't want it bought with Verde's money. Mr. Forrester, Joey is human. That money's coming in without too much sweat. It won't be easy for him to accept a job for fifty or sixty dollars a week if he quits the gang."

"If? He'll quit. I've got confidence in him."

Annoyed, she cried. "You said that before. Are you trying to convince me or yourself? I'm sorry, Mr. Forrester, I don't like the whole setup. I'm getting Joey free and clear of that gang before he becomes too involved."

Gruffly he said, "You can't do that, Tina. Joey's been working for Verde less than a week and already you've conjured up a lot of nonsensical fears. You can't spoil everything, Tina, not now. Ride along with us, Tina."

Coldly she said, "It isn't fair to Joey or me."

"Fair?" he cried. "For God's sake, if all people were as selfish and self-centered as you're trying to be, what would this world be like? Those kids need help. You can't ask Joey to turn his back on them."

All the color draining out of her face, she said, "I've thought it over carefully. First comes Joey, then I'll worry about those kids."

"Tina, listen to me. You're excited. Wait a while. Give Joey a little more time. Then we'll talk it over."

She shook her head. "There's nothing to talk over."

"Tina, I beg you. If you don't want to do it for those boys, do it for me, a favor, a big favor. If Joey doesn't succeed in getting evidence in a little while, you do what your conscience tells you. You found a refuge in this Settlement House. Give those other kids the same break."

She thought it over for a long minute, then she said, "All right, Mr. Forrester. It's against my better judgment, but I do owe you something. I'll wait . . . a week . . . a month . . . I don't know. I won't promise because even tonight I could change my mind."

"That's all I ask," he said. "Another thing. Whatever you do, this job is yours for as long as you want it."

She shook her head. "If Joey quits, I quit."

Chapter 16

The sun was hot on South Street as Duke crossed under the driveway and stopped to watch the gang horsing around at the far end of the pier. Pinto was standing up on the stringpiece, thumbs stuck in his ear, wiggling his fingers at Carlotta, a Puerto Rican girl who had joined the gang a few days ago. The shapely girl, rolling her hips as if she knew the gang was studying her anatomy, came after Pinto. He grasped her two fleshy breasts, and when she screamed, pulled her with him into the mass of refuse which bubbled out of the sewer under the pier.

Francine stood on the stringpiece laughing down at Danny who was squirting up mouthfuls of river in her direction. Farfel, walking by nonchalantly, pushed her in. She came up swearing, her hair plastered over her eyes. Barney and Pinto's brother, Putky, were teasing by words and gestures the pilot of the tugboat moored to the pier. Putky jumped on board and when the pilot came after him, wrapped his arms around the old man's waist and pulled him into the water. The pilot came up minus his cap, swam to the rope ladder, hoisted himself up. In a minute, the hauser unhitched from the iron stanchion, the tugboat began to glide away from the dock. Spitting water, Charlie Patterson came into sight, following Elaine up the wooden ladder onto the pier. Duke felt a churning inside him and a tight pressure under his breastbone. Suddenly he didn't care to see the gang. Instead, he wanted to be alone with his thoughts.

On the stringpiece he crossed to the adjacent pier, walked down to where freight cars on a barge were moored. He piled his clothing at the foot of the stanchion and after tightening his Bikini bathing shorts climbed up on top of a freight car to sun himself. He could see Pinto chasing Carlotta across the next pier. Duke laughed. Then Charlie came back in view and the distance did nothing to lessen the sickness he again felt.

Duke closed his eyes and the sun lay across his body in a gold cover. . . .

The clock rolled back nine hours and he was in the District Attorney's office on the ninth floor, where the special Grand Jury had convened. All morning he'd sat on a hard bench in the anteroom while people paraded in and out of the grand jury room: Charlie Patterson, sulking; Detective Kale, frowning; some people he didn't know, all looking tensed and worried and a little pale . . . Augie Verde, calm and collected.

Duke, coming down the street, had arrived just after the reporters had surrounded Verde in front of the building on Leonard Street. Duke tried to step around them—his subpoena said 9:30 and he didn't want any trouble—but the reporters wouldn't budge.

Verde, smiling confidently, his bald head shining in the pale morning sun, was saying, "Of course, I'll sign a waiver of immunity. I've got nothing to fear."

"What'll you tell them, Augie?"

"Now that's a stupid question."

"What do you know about the cop killing?"

"Stupid question two."

"Can you help the grand jury in their search for whoever stole those guns from the pier?"

"Strike three," Verde cried. "You're out."

"What kind of piece do you carry, Augie, a Police Special thirty-eight?"

Verde's smile vanished. "You and your Commie newspaper are always baiting me. This grand jury should investigate Communism in the newspaper field."

For three hours Duke sat in the anteroom while Verde was questioned inside. He wished with all his heart that Verde and the others would take all day so that he wouldn't have to testify until tomorrow when he was sure the sickness in his chest would disappear. Kale sat down next to him.

"You'll be going in soon. Just a tip, Duke. This isn't the upstairs room in the precinct. You'll sign a waiver and they'll ask questions and if you don't stick to the truth the D.A. will draw up a bill charging you with perjury. It's up to you."

"Thanks," Duke said. "It's a good thing you told me about that."

Kale said, "You'll tell them about those pieces you swiped from the pier, who got 'em, who did the job with you."

"Why don't you write out the script so I don't have trouble remembering?"

Kale said, "Somehow Verde is tied up in this, maybe not personally but through one of his boys. You could save yourself a lot of aggravation if—"

"Why don't you lay off me?" He glared, breathing heavily. "How would you like me to tell that jury you tried to feed me stuff to tell them? 'Just tie in Verde with those guns,' you told me, 'tell the jury Verde knows all about the stolen pieces so I can win a tin medal and a promotion when they get him for perjury.' That's what you told me to say."

Kale swore under his breath. "You got gall, Koslo, but I'll cut it out of you. Where the hell you going?"

"For a drink of water; do you mind?"

As Duke was returning from the fountain in the center of the hallway, he saw Verde come out, his dapper lawyer at his side. The reporters moved in on him, the photographers snapping pictures.

"Hope you didn't commit perjury in there," a reporter said.

Verde laughed. "You hope nothing of the kind."

A woman reporter said, "What did you tell the jury, Mr. Verde?"

"Everything I know."

"How much did that add up to?"

"Zero, big and fat. When you know nothing about—"

Verde's attorney said, "You boys know Augie can't discuss what went on in that room."

"Three hours is a lot of questioning."

"Sorry, boys . . ."

It was almost four o'clock in the afternoon when Duke was called into the grand jury room. Thirty minutes later, when he was excused, he walked out head high, proud of himself.

Hell, man, he'd been as cool as Verde any day. It hadn't been bad. Well, not too bad, though that damn ache was still in his chest. Twenty-three grand jurors listening to the D.A. pop his questions, asking some of their own, getting the right answers. He chuckled—for Dukey, not for them

stuffed shirts. Jeez, it had been easier than sitting on a stool in that special room in the Seventh Precinct with them cops banging questions at you a mile a minute. One grand juror had annoyed him, a loud-mouthed guy who asked all those damn questions about Duke's personal life, the street he lived on, his folks, Joey, his J.D. card down at the precinct.

Finally, Duke had rebelled. "You sure got a lot of time on your hands. What's my family got to do with those revolvers you been talkin' about? Yakity-yak-yakity-yak."

They'd been startled and he'd felt a gratifying sense of exhilaration. An eighteen-year-old telling them off. For the next five minutes he'd been sorry he'd blown his cork because now the questions were quicker, sharper, more personal.

Duke had said defiantly, "If you boys are writing a social book maybe I can give you some inside stuff like who sleeps with who in my neighborhood, but these questions don't make sense."

The grand jury foreman said curtly, "Just answer the questions."

Soon tiring of Duke's childhood and present existence, and all questions on the stolen revolvers having been exhausted, the D.A. excused him.

"We may have to recall you," he had told Duke, "in the near future. We expect you to be available. You understand . . ."

Duke had snapped. "I understand. Any time you want to waste a lot of your time, my time and those jurors' time just call on me."

He had felt rather than seen the stir he'd created as he walked out.

On the freight car, Duke stirred restlessly and sat up, a vile taste in his mouth. The shadow of the afternoon had moved across his body and swift dusk was turning the sky a tranquil limpid blue. Across the dock he could see Francine and Pinto getting dressed, talking and laughing, while Charlie Patterson swam around in the river, coming up through the garbage to spurt like a whale.

Showing off, the no-good creep. All on account of that rat bastard . . . those jurors looking at him, stabbing with their eyes, shooting questions, probing into his life with a

fine switchblade, hurting. That creep was responsible for everything—including the loss of the job Duke could have had working with Benny Cantor. . . .

Now Francine and Pinto were gone and Charlie was up on the stringpiece, hands on his knees. Charlie's arms came up and around as his body shot out in a beautiful swan dive.

Get killed! With all his heart Duke wished a log would be floating half-submerged beneath the water and Charlie would smash into it with his head. . . . *Get killed, you lousy punk. Then maybe I can sleep nights.*

. . . Lying awake, thinking of what Charlie had done to him, how Charlie was still around, one of the gang, as if nothing had happened, Duke felt sick and miserable. Charlie had to be punished, that was elementary. But how? . . . If the gang only knew, they'd be ashamed of Duke, their leader, thinking he was chicken for not having taken it out of Charlie's hide by now. That was why he hadn't told them how Charlie had ratted on him, that was why he couldn't until he'd ripped Charlie's ass and thrown him out of the gang. Then he could announce it loud and clear.

He pillow'd his face on his left arm and closed his eyes, the breeze warm on his back. A somber quiet hung over the waterfront. A familiar, grating voice awakened Duke just as he was falling asleep.

"Whatcha doin' here all alone?" Charlie Patterson said. "I swim across to dive off the freighters and I see a body layin' here. Man, you sure looked like a corpse."

Duke sat up, scratched his chest, his thigh, his shoulders. "Beat it, Charlie."

Charlie's smile faded. "I fixed it, Duke. Honest to God, I told that jury crap. I didn't remember, that's what I said. The D.A. bellyached plenty but—"

"You're a no-good creep." Duke felt a sudden chill and the itch was spreading to his back.

A bum on the adjoining pier, a pint bottle at his mouth, looked across at them, took another swallow.

Charlie said, "They asked me about the bullets. You know, the first time you wanted 'em. I told them the cops'd beat me and made me lie."

Duke said harshly, "Lousy cokie."

"What you want me to do, Duke, I'll do it. Okay, I

made a mistake. It wasn't all my fault; those cops got ways, but I admit I shouldn'ta opened up. But it's done—"

"It ain't done," Duke shouted. "You ain't paid for it yet. And you and I know you gotta pay for puttin' me though that third degree in the precinct, for puttin' me into that bastard jury room, for costin' me a good job. Yeah, a good job they couldn't gimme because I was too hot. . . ."

Big red welts had appeared on his body and he scratched fiercely. "Go away, for Chris' sakes, get away from me."

"I told that jury you was a nice guy, the best leader a gang ever had—" He stopped short. "That don't sound so good. I didn't mean it that way."

Duke stood up and his arm, coming around in a back-hand motion, caught Charlie across the mouth. Charlie staggered on the sloping roof but kept his footing. A drop of blood appeared on his lower lip.

Charlie spat out something obscene.

Duke swung and missed. Charlie slammed his fist on the back of Duke's neck, knocking him flat. Charlie pleaded. "I don't blame you for bein' sore, Duke, but you never had no cops smackin' you around, slappin' your belly till you puked, kickin' you around till you throwed up, then rubbin' your face in the puke."

Duke, on his feet again, spit in Charlie's face. "Rat, rat, rat."

Charlie wiped away the saliva. "You no-good lousy cripple."

Duke came after him. Charlie ducked, lifted his knee into Duke's groin, and as Duke clutched his middle, dived overboard. Duke stared down at Charlie and suddenly the hate and anger came up almost choking him, and the heat shimmered before his eyes in a red haze.

"No-good punk, I'll break you in half."

Duke heaved himself off the freight car in a shallow dive. Charlie, head under water, was already headed for the adjoining pier where his clothes lay heaped near the pilings. In a steady crawl stroke, Duke caught up to him before he was halfway across. Charlie ducked under, one hand around Duke's waist as the other clutched at his groin. Duke gasped and brought his fist down on Charlie's neck, breaking his hold. Charlie came up, water streaming from his mouth as he gagged and choked.

Duke moved close but like a flash Charlie was behind him, his left arm around Duke's head, pulling him under. The blackness swathed Duke's body like a winding sheet, clinging, squeezing. Dirty streaks of light shot past his eyes as he felt himself growing weaker.

You're gonna die, he thought, out here in the river, where nobody will ever know. Your body will wash down the river out into the bay, then out to sea, and there won't even be a tombstone to show you were ever alive.

Pain tore at his eyelids and shot through his head as with every ounce of remaining strength he twisted out of Charlie's grasp. He came up, the surface chop slapping his face. Breathing heavily, they looked at each, glaring. Duke could see Charlie only dimly, for the shimmering red haze had returned. In a dog paddle, Charlie came close, reached out. Duke grasped his wrist and, turning him halfway around, slipped both arms under Charlie's armpits, hooked them back of the neck in a full nelson, wrapped his legs around the body in a scissors hold. His head under water, Charlie tried desperately to shake off the weight on his back. He came up for a second gasping and called out, his voice shrill with fear. Duke pushed the head under again, muting him. The tide slammed them into the pilings but Duke held on grimly. In a last burst of energy Charlie thrashed his legs, churning up a white foam, and suddenly went limp. Duke gave one final squeeze with his arms and legs, then kicked himself free. Face under water, Charlie floated into the current.

"Stop acting," Duke called out.

The current swept Charlie around the piles, into the river. "Charlie!" Duke cried out. In a crawl stroke, he raced into the tide, turned the pier corner. Charlie was nowhere in sight.

"Charlie," Duke cried, "stop horsin' around."

A yacht sailed slowly by, a man and woman sitting in chairs, talking, a girl of fifteen drinking from a Coke bottle. A ghost of a whisper stirred Duke's lips. "Charlie, where you hidin'? Okay, okay, the gag's finished. Come on out from under the pier. Charlie!"

Sick and frightened, he climbed up onto the pier, looked down at the river, a crinkled sheet of foil in the dusk. His hand at his mouth to hold back the scream tearing at his throat, he ran across the pier, searched the river, but as

far as he could see there was no Charlie, no body, nothing.

A freighter was being towed by a tugboat into the adjacent pier. Duke crossed to where his clothes were piled at the base of the stanchion, dressed as quickly as his shaking hands permitted, and ran off the pier.

Nobody saw you, Duke, so what you shivering about? Nobody?

There were always people about, longshoremen, roustabouts, lolling in the sun or cooling off in the shade, waiting for a ship to dock, bums sleeping off a drunk, watching from behind crates, or kids. But he'd seen no one—which proved nothing—except that wino drinking out of the bottle.

About to go down the steps to the club he heard voices, and changed his mind. In long strides he circled the block, entered a tenement house on Ludlow Street, scooted down the long flight of wooden stairs to the cellar. He walked through the darkness, rats scurrying away from under his feet, and after fumbling with the lock on the yard door, managed to open it. Daylight was gone and the stars were beginning to blink as he climbed over the fence and dropped quietly on the other side.

Sidling up to the rear window of the Orchard Club, he peered inside. It was pitch-dark but, after a full minute, he could see the outline of the stove, the open door to the toilet, a leg of the cot. For another full minute he stared inside, trying to determine if anybody was on the cot, then decided to chance it. If, when he got inside, a pair should jump up from the cot, he'd make some excuses. Something funny like: "Just checking to see if you're doing it right. Sorry, pal . . ."

In that case he'd have no alibi.

The back door was usually bolted from the inside but occasionally, on hot summer days, it was opened to permit cross-ventilation. Murmuring a prayer, he tried the knob. The door didn't budge. Now the window was the only means of gaining entrance. The heels of both hands pressed against the top of the window frame, both legs firmly planted on the concrete yard floor, he pushed upward. The window was closed tight. Each breath rasping his throat, he continued to push upward, hoping to break the catch. After a while, a half-stifled sob escaping his lips, he stepped back in defeat.

He contemplated breaking the pane, but decided that would not only bring the members from the main room, ruining his plans, but even if the gang was too busy playing around to hear the tinkle of broken glass, somebody would question the break and perhaps remember it when Duke presented his alibi to the police.

He walked around the yard, searching for something thin and hard, anything that could slide between the window frames and force open the catch. If only he had his switchblade! But the switch and all other weapons classified as dangerous in the penal code had been collected and stored for emergencies in a cellar bin in Pinto's tenement.

He saw the wood stick and swooped down on it. Carefully, he worked the wood between the two windows, pressed it against the curved end of the catch, pressed. The wood splintered into a dozen useless pieces. Swearing, he flung away the piece he still clutched in his hand and returned to a fruitless search of the yard. The window had to be broken. There was no other way. Let the club members wonder, let the precinct cops scratch their fat heads, that was how it had to be. He felt in his back pocket for a handkerchief to wrap around his fist for protection against cuts, and his fingers touched his keys. With bated breath, he pulled out the two keys and die charm on a chain. The thick Yale key that opened his house door was too short, but the letter-box key, thin and flat might be long enough.

The key slid easily between the frames, barely reached the catch. Duke pressed. The catch moved a fraction of an inch as the key slipped off. The next time the catch turned a full quarter of an inch. After wiping his sweated fingers on his shirt, Duke tried again. Another fraction, another. When the sweat ran down his forehead into his eyes, he stopped to wipe himself with his handkerchief. Another eighth of an inch, then the key bent out of shape. He felt a pounding of the blood in his temples.

Not now! Just when success was in sight . . .

He lay the key on the concrete, stomped on it, straightening it out enough for another try. Three more tries, and the catch was open. In seconds, Duke had silently lifted the window and stepped into the room. Quietly, he closed the window, brushed away the pieces of wood, shot home the catch. In the darkness he undressed, removing his swim-

ming trunks which he rolled up into a ball and hid inside the stove. With his hands he mussed up the cot, pounded an indentation in the pillow.

Assuming a sleepy look, Duke opened the door to the main clubroom, and standing there stark naked, shouted in an impatient voice, "For cryin' out loud, can't a guy sleep? All this noise!"

It was quiet for a full second as four startled faces, Francine's, Pinto's, Farfel's and Barney's, turned in his direction from where they sat drinking beer and eating delicatessen sandwiches around a bridge table.

Farfel guffawed, pointed needlessly. "Looka him!" and everyone burst into hilarious laughter.

"Laugh," Duke said, "go on and laugh your heads off. You can't let a guy sleep a couple hours? One lousy hour, that's all I been sleepin', maybe two."

Francine moved to Duke's side. "Why didn't you tell us you were in there, Dukey? I thought that grand jury was still working on you."

Duke snickered. "Got rid of 'em around five. Then I grabbed a sandwich and came over here to catch up on lost sleep."

She slipped an arm around his waist, kissed his lips. "If I'd known, I would've joined you. I also got sleep to catch up on."

Duke swept Francine up in his arms. "You can put me back to sleep, baby."

She rubbed the hair on his chest, bit his neck. Carrying her inside, he kicked the door closed and dropped her with a bounce on the cot.

"Ouch, you hurt my dignity," she laughed, jumping up to wrap her arms around his neck.

She held him close, her hips rotating slowly, then she stepped back, almost tearing her blouse and skirt from her body. Slowly she moved to the cot and slid onto his lap.

"Love me, Dukey," she whispered. "Let's forget the grand jury, let's forget everything except me and you."

He wasn't listening to her. "Something wrong with Pinto?"

"Pinto? He's okay, laughing, having a good time."

"He wasn't laughing when I showed up a minute ago."

"I didn't notice." She laughed gaily. "Maybe he was

too shocked to do anything. I should be mad, you coming out, advertising like that. Supposin' some of the girls'd been around? Bet they'd all made a dive for you. Whatsa matter, Duke? I'm only kidding."

Irritable, nervous, he said, "I know you are. That grand jury was rough." He stretched out on the cot and still sitting on his thighs she leaned over to kiss him, but he turned his head away.

"There is something the matter," she said.

He ran a hand along her thigh, squeezed it. "I told you, that grand jury . . . Do me a favor, baby. Get dressed and go home."

Fleshy lips curled. "I never heard that before."

He threw an arm over his eyes. "I ain't feelin' so hot. I'll see you tomorrow and then I'll give you enough lovin' to make-up for a month. Please!"

"All right, Dukey," she said gently. No words were spoken until she had completed dressing, then she said, "See you tomorrow, darling."

"Don't say anything out there. I don't want to listen to wisecracks."

"I'll tell them you were wonderful. I've got to say something."

She was gone and he lay there staring up into the darkness, his conscience knotted by despair.

You killed him, Duke.

It was an accident.

*You knew he was unconscious, yet you let him go.
I didn't know, honest to God, I thought he was playing possum.*

*When he began to float away you could have saved him.
It was too late. The tide . . .*

You wanted Charlie dead.

That's a lie.

Dead.

A damned lie.

Why didn't you save him? The truth, Duke.

He had to die, the lousy stoolie had to get what was coming to him . . . so I could sleep nights.

The door opened and Pinto stood silhouetted in the doorway. "They're all gone," he said, "everybody but me."

"Make it unanimous," Duke said.

Pinto was hurt. "Sure, Duke."

"I didn't mean nothin', Pinto, honest. You're my pal, the best."

"I was wonderin', maybe I can help you."

"Help . . ." He sat up, swung his feet to the floor. "Who said I needed help?"

His face devoid of emotion, Pinto said, "I was in here twenty minutes before you showed up in that doorway."

A terrifying sense of disaster struck him. "I could've been in the toilet."

Pinto said, "If you say so, Duke, I'll alibi you all the way."

"What alibi? I was in the toilet."

In cool amusement, Pinto said, "If you was, you must've been under me when I sat down."

A tremor ran up Duke's body. Suddenly cold, he picked up his shirt and slipped his arms through the sleeves. His mind caught in a tangle of fear and weariness, he cried, "Okay, I was on the cot. You didn't see me when you went to the toilet."

Pinto said, "For cryin' out loud, Duke, I'd be your friend if I wasn't a Orchard boy. I don't know why you playin' footsie with me. You need a alibi, you got it. You want, I'll forget I ever went into that toilet."

"The others see you, Francine, Barney, when you came in here?"

"I was here first; the others came later with the beer and sandwiches. I don't know what you're mad about, Duke. Hell, I been your alibi before."

"This is different, Pinto. This isn't ten-days-in-the-workhouse stuff."

"Whatever it is, I'm with you."

Duke shook his head. "I don't want you, I don't need you. You never came in here like the others, that's all you gotta know. The other way, you start to alibi me, the cops are liable to break you down. I said liable to, Pinto, I didn't say they would. My way, I gotta worry only about me squealing on myself. Beat it now, Pinto."

Duke closed his eyes and as he relaxed with utter weariness he could feel his taut nerves calming.

Chapter 17

The police patrol car rolled along the pier, stopping at the far end, almost flat against the stringpiece. A tall, somewhat corpulent policeman got out to stretch luxuriously.

"What a night," he said, smiling up at the starlit sky.

The policeman in the car lighted a cigarette, flicked the burnt match through the open window. "A night for what? Jeez, I'd like to be in bed right now."

The tall officer lighted a short cigar, sucked in smoke. "Your wife must be real good, all the time you want to dive into bed."

"That all you got on your mind, Keever?"

Keever chuckled. "What else is there?"

It was 11:30. In a half-hour, their tour of duty completed, they could return to the precinct, change into their street clothes and go their way: one home to his wife and two children; the other, after a couple hours in the corner bar, back to the two-room furnished flat he rented by the week. Whether he slept alone that night depended on the amount of liquor he consumed and the females who happened to be in Hymie's Bar. In the one case, too much liquor killed his appetite for sex; in the second, he liked his women buxom and large in the rear, and should only emaciated women come into Hymie's that night, Keever would make sure he got a heavy load on so he could fall asleep without the sleeping pill called sex.

Keever flicked ashes from his cigar, watched gray wisps float down on the bundle at his feet. He kicked at the clothing and a shoe sailed ten feet. Interested, he squatted and pawed at the clothing.

"Hal," he said, "get off your fat ass and bring me a light."

Grunting, Hal came out of the car. "Take any pier, go looking with a light, and I bet you find tea smoked down to the tip."

"This ain't marijuana." He took the flashlight from Hal, played a cone of light over the patched dungarees, the pockets turned inside out, a worn brown shoe, the lace missing.

Hal said, "Some kid ran off and forgot his shoes and pants."

Keever frowned. "Some things you can forget, but not your shoes. These pieces of coal all along the pier'd remind you fast enough."

Mouth drawn tightly across his teeth, Hal squatted too, and for a moment they stared at each other.

Keever said, "Looks like somebody went through the pockets. Chances are there were more clothes, a shirt, maybe socks, underwear." He stood up and looked out at the dark river flowing smoothly and quietly upstream. "Those bums would steal anything. The shoes and pants weren't worth taking." He climbed on to the stringpiece, looked down at the water whispering against the pilings. "Any kid reported missing today?"

Hal shrugged. "The back-room bulletin said nothing about missing kids. There was a guy missing on Henry Street, the one with the wife and four kids."

Keever flung his cigar into the river. "He was a fat slob, weighed two-ten. I'll bet these dungarees fitted a fourteen- or fifteen-year-old kid with no ass and no waist."

Hal looked unhappy. "Around this neighborhood nobody knows their kids are missing till they take inventory at the end of the week, when the old man gets paid and gives each kid a few cents' allowance. If he's got too much left over, he knows somebody didn't collect and starts investigating. Kids stay out a couple nights a week like it was nothing. Hell, in my day, I used to get my ass banged around if I stayed out till midnight."

Keever scratched the back of his hairy neck. "This kid could've been chased by a gang and couldn't grab his clothes." Reluctantly, he shifted his gaze back to the river. "If he fell in, you'd think somebody'd seen it happen and report it."

"Maybe nothing happened, so what's to report? If something did, well, in a day or a week they'll find the body. Unless it got washed out to the ocean. Let's get these pants and shoes back to the station house. It's almost time for our relief."

The following morning the body of a seventeen-year-old boy was found wedged between a garbage scow and the pier on Pike Street. The afternoon papers told the story:

GRAND JURY WITNESS FOUND DEAD IN RIVER
PATTERSON IDENTIFIED
BY BROTHER

A body found in the East River at the foot of Pike Street was identified positively this morning as that of Charles Patterson, who testified yesterday as a witness before a special grand jury in the New York County Criminal Courts Building. Although Patterson's brother, a New York City patrolman, who made the identification, insisted that his brother had been slain, the police are inclined to dismiss this theory.

Deputy Inspector Bendix, Manhattan East detective, believed that Patterson had said nothing before the grand jury that would goad anybody into killing him. "If somebody had wanted to shut him up," Deputy Inspector Bendix said, "it would have been before, not after he'd testified. Except for abrasions and lacerations that could have been inflicted by contact with piers or boats, there was no mark on the body that the medical examiner could see with the naked eye. Gangs don't operate that way; they exact a more violent death. However, an autopsy will be performed...."

The newspaper article concluded: "It is rumored that the police have in custody a witness to Patterson's death."

It was the following day.

Detective Kale sat in the detectives' room talking to a man badly in need of a shave and a bath. It was the same derelict Duke had seen drinking out of a wine bottle on the South Street pier. The old man, obviously ill at ease, kept wetting his dry tobacco-flecked lips. He had a bony white face, restless gray eyes deeply sunk in their sockets.

"You keep me here all night," he protested, "not even a smell of a cork. How you expect me to remember?"

"You'll remember," Kale said. "I've got twenty kids in the next room. Every one of them, except one, admits swimming off the South Street pier at one time or another Monday afternoon. All you got to do is look them over, one at a time, and pick out the one you saw up on the freight cars with Patterson. Just point your finger and say, 'This is the boy . . . or girl.'"

"It wasn't no girl. Don't y'think I know the difference? Anyway, all I seen is this kid, the sun on his face, nothing else."

Kale said, "You also saw them arguing."

"They were beatin' their gums. I couldn't hear a word."

"Nobody swung a punch?"

The man shook his head. "They could have after I left the pier. I didn't wait round to hear 'em finish the argument." He wiped his dry lips. "Wished I had a drink."

"You point out the kid and we'll buy you a bottle."

The man swallowed hard. "I'll point him out."

"Only if he's out there," Kale said, a little angrily. "Don't you put me and some innocent kid on the spot trying to earn the bottle. I may as well tell you now, most of those kids have good alibis. I know they couldn't have been up there alone with Patterson. Point out the wrong kid and I'll ride the ass off you. Understand? Tell you what, instead of making a contest out of this, either way you get the bottle."

The man's eyes blinked. "I wouldn't get a innocent kid in dutch, not for ten bottles."

Jackson, who had come in to hear the last words, said, "Give us a wrong steer and I'll drop you off a bridge. I just hope your eyesight is as good as you claim."

"Twenty-twenty," the man said.

"Drunk or sober? You couldn't even tell us the color of the kid's hair."

"The sun was on his hair and it looked blond, but it could've been brown. If he's out there, I'll find him."

Kale sighed. "Okay, you stay here till I call you. . . ."

Sixteen male members of the Orchard A.C. and four of their girl friends were lined against the walls, around filing cabinets, in front of the double window.

Kale said, "This is it. I'll give you one more chance to

make it easy on yourself, whoever you are." His gaze stayed with Duke an extra second, moved past Francine to Pinto. "We know one of you was up on the freight cars arguing with Charlie Patterson after the rest of the gang had left the vicinity. Now I'm not prepared at the moment to go into details. Charlie could have fallen off the freight cars and drowned. It's a possibility. If so, his death was accidental and we'd like to know about it so we can close out the case. I don't like open cases on our books. But somebody's got to come forward and make it official. He's got nothing to fear. There's no punishment for accidental homicide. Step forward and identify yourself, and tell me what happened so I can send you all home. Come on, feller."

They stared at him, faces cold and hostile, defiance in their silence. Kale's gaze returned to Duke.

"I got a witness," Kale said, "who saw the whole thing. If he points out the one who tangled with Patterson, it's gonna be murder because I couldn't and wouldn't believe his story then. If he comes forward now, I'll listen with both ears."

Duke stirred, uneasy tension growing slowly under his skin.

Kale said, "You want me to assume that Patterson's death was not accidental? Because if you're afraid to come forward, that's what it was, a premeditated and planned murder. Premeditation can be a minute or a year, it doesn't matter as long as you have time to think about it. Last chance . . ."

He opened the door and motioned for Jackson to bring in the derelict. Duke recognized the man, and a chill spread over him, turning into an outright shudder. Francine looked up at him, a question in her eyes. Duke shook his head, said nothing.

Kale said to the man, "Look around, see if you recognize the kid you saw up on that freight car. Take your time. I got all day. The faster we get things over with, the faster you all go home. You've already spent twenty-four hours in here. You wanna play for forty-eight, go on and wisecrack."

At a signal from Kale, the man, starting on the far left, studied each face with an icy stare then moved on to the next. Elaine stuck her tongue out when he paused for an

extra second to look her over, sunken eyes suddenly alert. Flustered, the man continued on to Pinto.

As the man moved around the circle toward him, Duke stared straight ahead, fighting the panic rising in him.

What the hell can this bum say, that you were up on those cars? He's a liar, that's all you gotta say, he's drunk, he's blind, he's a no-good bum and your word's better'n his. What can they prove?

The man stopped before Francine, his eager gaze skipping from her face to the bare shoulders, to the well-filled pink blouse. Francine was amused. Then she heard the tiny catch of sound and looked up into Duke's eyes to see the fright. In a split second, she grasped the situation. The man still lingered before her, licking his lips nervously.

Francine cried, "That's twice you raped me, pop. You could get locked up for rape. Hey, officers, lock this man up."

"Shut up," Kale said. "You crazy or something? Don't pay attention to her."

"Pop, you're a criminal," she cried, eyes distended.

Disconcerted, the man shook himself, moved quickly down the line, barely looking at the rest of the gang.

"Nobody," he cried, "nobody."

Angrily, Kale said, "Where you running, pop? Don't let that broad . . ." He stopped. The damage had been done. Without a backward look, the man had gone out of the room, Jackson a step behind him.

Kale said to Francine, "I wish I could prove you did that on purpose." He glanced at Duke, smiling now, the taut sharpness gone from his face. "Okay, you win for now but . . ." He left the threat dangling as he went out.

The old man couldn't look at Kale as he entered the room. "You shouldn'ta put girls in that lineup. I told you it wasn't a girl. I'm sorry the kid wasn't in there."

Kale burned. "You didn't even finish looking. That girl—oh, what's the use."

Jackson said, "No sense in letting pop go back in there; even if he does pick out somebody, they'd say he identified nobody the first time around and we coached him the second time."

Kale said, "That wouldn't stop me. Just that I got the

feeling this bum is half-blind. He could never see across a dock. Give him five bucks and let him go."

The old man mumbled, "That kid up on the cars had nothin' on but trunks. These kids got clothes on and it makes a difference."

Kale said, "It's the face I'm interested in, not the body. You want these kids to strip for you?"

He nodded, smiled.

Jackson said, "One look at that blonde and you'd probably go outside and pull a kid down a cellar."

The man was indignant. "I'm a wino; I don't molest children."

"Okay, pop," Jackson said tiredly. "Here's five. Go out and get stinko."

He ushered the old man out, closed the door after him. Wiping his face with a handkerchief, he said, "We've got quite a delegation downstairs—a priest, a minister, a rabbi, Forrester, mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, aunts . . . and the dead kid's brother, Neal Patterson."

Kale said, "Keep Patterson off of me. He's hollering for blood and he doesn't care who bleeds to death. He won't accept any accidental-death solution." He sighed. "But I guess that's how it's gonna wind up."

Jackson sat on the edge of a desk. "Don't look so brokenhearted. I know you would have given a week's pay to hook Duke Koslo with a Murder-One rap."

Kale's thick eyebrows bunched over his nose as he frowned. "Every time something dirty happens in the neighborhood, I get the feeling young Koslo is on the job."

"Keep wishing and maybe the next time . . ."

Kale said fiercely. "I don't wish any more; I pray. I'd like nothing better than to take that kid out of circulation. Sooner or later my prayers got to be answered. If I had just one clue on this Patterson case!"

Jackson lighted a cigarette. "The medical examiner says death was due to drowning; no suspicious marks, no sign of violence."

Kale shrugged. "A kick between the legs, the flat of the hand across the back of the neck, things like that may knock a guy unconscious and leave no suspicious marks. Suppose Koslo and Patterson had an argument."

"There you go again. Why Koslo? Anybody could've had an argument with Patterson. Nobody saw Koslo on

that pier. He was in the club, if you want to believe his friends."

Kale said, "I'm sure they didn't see Koslo on that pier; they all can't lie that good. As for his club alibi—hell, those kids sounded truthful, especially his girl friend." He smiled grimly. "I guess I let my wishing influence my judgment."

Jackson said, "I'd rather believe Verde and his boys did the job, if I wasn't so certain Patterson's death was completely accidental."

Kale shook his head. "If Verde wanted to teach the kids a lesson for the future, he'd have advertised. When Verde advertises everybody concerned has no doubt about it. The Patterson death was too quiet."

He picked up the newspaper lying on the desk, turned it around to the big headline:

BOY'S DEATH BELIEVED ACCIDENT

Jackson said, "You still don't believe it."

Kale flung the paper aside. "What's the difference what I believe? Let's not make a liar out of the headline. Chase the kids."

Chapter 18

Joey pulled the oars into the rowboat, stepped quickly onto the wharf to hook the rope onto the ring embedded in the wood plank. He held out his hand to Tina, grinned at her. There was no answering smile.

"My," he said, "you sure are getting friendly these days."

In silence, she walked on ahead while he turned in his ticket at the window and collected his deposit. When he rejoined her she had her back to him. He slipped both arms around her small waist and pulled her close to bury his face in her dark hair hanging loosely over her shoulders.

"Please, Joey," she said, "this isn't the place or the time."

"Sorry, baby. My watch is on the blink." He glanced down at his palms. "Say, look at them blisters. Guess I'm getting soft." He followed her up the road. "I once rowed for six hours without getting no blisters. Look at my hands."

Staring straight ahead, she didn't answer him.

A worried look in his eyes, he watched her hips undulating under the blue cotton skirt. "For cryin' out loud, will you stop for a second?" He waited until she'd turned around. "What's wrong? I don't know who it is, you or me or both of us. All of a sudden we've got things to fight about. All of a sudden you got no smile for me. Well, not like it used to be."

Coolly she said, "How did it used to be?"

"You kiss like a martyr, you love like a . . ."

"Two-dollar bum."

"Don't say that again," he cried angrily. "I don't like it when you talk like those club kids."

Cheeks a smoldering red, she said, "What's the difference between them and me?"

He took her arms. "They're just kids—"

"And loving for them is a criminal offense."

"—and they do it just for kicks. There's a difference between kicks and love."

Her voice was tired. "That makes everything strictly kosher."

"There we go arguing again," he said, staring at her with honest bewilderment. "I can't figure you out. You know I love you real bad. Sometimes I don't say it, on account of I'm not so hot with the words, but you know how I feel."

Abruptly she moved away from him, moved onto the grass to sit with her back against a tree. He stood over her, a look of frustration on his rugged face.

"Half the time," he protested, "you ain't even listening."

Chin up, she said, "I heard you. So what? You love me and I love you and that makes everything just ducky."

He talked with his hands and shoulders. "You're sore because we ain't married? I didn't ask you a hundred times?" He dropped to his knees, leaned over to kiss her cheek, her forehead. "On my knees, Tina, I'm asking you."

She shook her head wearily. "We agreed when your Dick Tracy undercover job with the Verde gang was

finished and you got the job Mr. Forrester promised you in the Settlement House, we'd get married." Her voice had a new note. "That is the reason you took that job with Benny, wasn't it, to save the youth of America?"

He sat down, not looking at her. "The way you say it!"
"Why did you take the job, Joey?"

"Talk to you and talk to the wall, it's the same thing. You know why I took the job. One, I had to keep Duke clean. Two, I got to get enough evidence on Verde and his boys to put a dent in the organization. That way, maybe Duke and a lot of other kids won't get tangled with that mob."

She couldn't keep the sarcasm out of her tone. "Very noble, I must say. Don't tell me you still haven't got enough evidence to make you a prime witness for the F.B.I. or the Senate Investigating Committee or the D.A.'s office."

"I need more time. Honest to God, Tina, I need time." He stretched out, his head in her lap, and it was quiet.

The first week working for Verde hadn't been bad, not for a hundred and twenty-five dollars. Backed by the organization, Benny was one of the moneylenders along the waterfront. Any seaman, longshoreman, dockhand or fish-market worker could borrow any multiple of five dollars from Benny. At the end of each week the borrower had three options on repaying the debt: He could pay the principal plus one dollar interest for each and every five dollars borrowed; he could pay the interest and have the debt run another week; or, with Benny's permission, he could have the principal plus interest run for another week at which time the debt would be enlarged by an additional twenty per cent of every dollar owed.

Joey, accompanied sometimes by Benny, sometimes by Pat Masters, another ex-fighter, collected the debts. It was a relatively simple procedure. In most instances the borrower simply exercised his option and paid without comment. Sometimes a man protested.

"I borrowed a lousy hundred bucks," he would moan. "Already I paid you one-fifty and I still ain't cut into the hundred. Don't y' think I'm entitled to a break?"

Joey could only say, "I don't make the rules. Next time you go to a bank."

"What bank? Hell, I'm in hock up to my ears."

"You want, I'll loan you twenty, a personal loan, no interest."

Benny quickly discouraged this kind of business. "Don't start that, Joey. If the Boss gets wind of it, he'll rip your hide. You can't be soft in this business. You'd be broke all the time."

In the second week Joey ran head-on into his first major problem. A fish-market peddler could pay neither the interest nor the two hundred dollars he had borrowed.

"My wife got stuck in a hospital. They took out her insides," the haggard man explained. "I hadda pay the doctor, he don't know from nothin'. Next week I'll have some money."

Before Joey could open his mouth, Pat Masters cried, "Don't gimme that crap, Aaron. We can't live on promises."

Aaron flicked a fish scale from his dirty oilcloth apron. "I got no money, Pat."

Masters back-handed him across the mouth, drawing blood. "They'll lay you next to your wife in that hospital."

Joey said, "Give him another week, Pat."

Masters slammed his fist into the fish peddler's stomach, doubling him up. Joey looked around at the other workers, each with a cleaver, knife, mallet or scraper in his fist, scowling from a respectable distance. Masters, completely sure of himself, showed no fear.

Joey knew Masters would explain later. "Nobody butts in or he gets it too, if not from us, from somebody else. They know it. We got 'em scared green. Never forget that."

Aaron took some crumpled bills out of his pocket. "Fifteen bucks," he pleaded, "my lunch and carfare money. Gimme a break."

Masters slapped the money out of Aaron's hand. "Stick it! You owe two bills plus fifty interest. What the hell's fifteen bucks? Lousy creep."

He slugged Aaron, knocking him down, booted him twice in the ribs.

Joey yanked Masters away. "Cut it out. Killing him won't get us the money."

"It ain't only him. We gotta put the fear of God in the other bastards. He reneges and gets away with it, everybody hollers poverty."

Aaron lay still, his unshaven face bloodless.

Joey said, "Looks like you showed 'em all right."

Masters said, "Benny ain't gonna like your attitude, Joey."

"Wise guy Benny," Joey said. "He figures we're gonna have trouble so he stays away."

A hook-nosed man, his roly-poly figure wrapped in a heavy coat, came out of the icebox, followed by a wave of vapor. His small agate eyes shifted from Masters and Joey to the man on the floor.

Lips parting in a rueful, comprehending grin, he said dully, "How much?"

"Two-fifty and he's even," Masters said.

"I need Aaron; he's my best worker."

"Fifty bucks and you got him for another week."

The man dug into his pocket, pulled out a wad of bills, quickly counted off fifty dollars which he handed to Masters.

The man said, "Someday a couple of the suckers will run to the D.A.'s office and you're gonna have trouble."

Masters said easily, "Don't hold your breath that long."

"Just one guy with guts could put a dent in your racket." The man turned to the rest of the workers. "What's this, a show or somethin'? Get Aaron up on his feet and let's get the work out."

Later, Benny was sympathetic. "I know how you feel, Joey, but that's the job I need you for. If you want to know the truth, the Boss himself suggested I send you on these jobs."

"Why do I get the special treatment?"

"Maybe Augie figures if you can't take this you'll never take some of the other jobs which are a lot tougher. Maybe if you can't stomach this, Augie don't need you. Tell you what, I'll try my best, if I got an idea there's gonna be trouble, to send somebody else with Pat Masters. I can't promise. The Boss won't like it if he finds out. But I can try . . . for a while."

Most of the third week Joey was assigned to booking dice games for the organization. With the aid of a stick-man and four armed men stationed in advantageous positions in a warehouse hired for the occasion by paying off the watchman, the precinct policemen and division men, Joey, backed by twenty thousand dollars of organiza-

tion money, accepted all bets on the roll of the dice. For every twenty dollars the bettor paid one dollar premium to the house. With this five-per-cent rake-off in his favor, Joey's account showed a slight deficit only once in the seven games played; the other six games brought a profit averaging twelve thousand dollars a day.

The games, played around a collapsible pool table, were fairly friendly despite the cursing and swearing at each other or at the bookmaker. Joey grinned good-naturedly and said, "I'm gettin' paid to listen to you suckers belly-ache. Hey, Turk," he yelled to the proprietor of one of the biggest fish markets on South Slip, "you gonna roll the dice or play with 'em?"

Once a man palmed a set of fixed dice, blood-red cubes fraudulently engraved with Verde's fancy A.V. initials. He'd made his point just once before Verde's stickman, an expert in crooked dice, saw through the deception. At a signal, two armed men moved in on the crooked player, and a sudden hush descended on the others, the man clutching the dice frozen into immobility by fear and shock. Quickly the armed men led the player outside. Joey heard the man cry out once, a muffled choking sound that died quickly, then there were sounds as of somebody beating a punching bag with hands and feet, followed by total quiet.

Benny Cantor, who attended all crap games with a bankroll ready for anybody in need of a quick loan, slapped the table. "C'mon, boys, this is a dead game. Kelly, shoot or get off the pot."

Chapter 19

It was a cheerless Wednesday of the fourth week, the skies full of clouds black with the promise of rain.

This afternoon, Benny seemed particularly grouchy, swearing at the weather, the cop on the beat, his suddenly active ulcers which had been dormant for the past two years.

"I take Amphojel by the quart but it don't help."

Joey said wisely, "It's the business. It ties your belly up in knots. Bet I got ulcers and don't know it."

"If you had ulcers, you'd know it." He glanced at Joey's sport shirt open at the throat, the sport jacket hanging loosely around the hips. "How many times I gotta tell you to dress up when you work with me?"

Joey laughed. "To collect money I gotta be the best-dressed man on the waterfront?"

"It ain't funny," Benny cried, displaying more anger than Joey's unsuitable attire called for. "Verde likes for us to look prosperous, not like slobs looking for a handout. Those suckers gotta figure the money don't mean nothing to us we got so much, and we're doing them a favor even talking to them. You never see Verde look sloppy."

"What else's he got to do?"

"You know Augie's one of the ten best-dressed men in New York?"

Joey looked at Benny sidewise. "Who voted on it, his boys? Aw, come on, Benny, you're off your feed, which means just one thing: Even you can't stomach the job we've gotta do right now."

There was a look of admission in Benny's eyes which he couldn't hide. "A job's a job. When you work in this racket for a while no job's too tough or two sickening. Joey, for cryin' out loud, go see my haberdasher. Tell Diamond to give you a couple dozen ties and shirts, white-on-whites, the kind I get, with monograms on the pockets. A present from me."

Joey chuckled. "A couple dozen? Hell, I can only wear 'em one at a time. This the house, Benny?"

Benny looked up at the yellow brick tenement as if seeing it for the first time. "Dumb spiks," he cried. "Why don't they move back to Puerto Rico?"

Wincing in distasteful anticipation of what awaited him inside, Benny slowly made his way through the dark hallway, up a flight of rickety wood stairs. The acrid scent of cats was strong in his nostrils, the air close with the odor of decay. When he stepped into something soft and squashy he cursed savagely. "God, my ulcers are killin' me."

Joey said, "You're just too refined for this work, Benny."

Benny cried, "Very funny. I don't know why the hell I put up with your clowning."

Joey said, "I don't clown once in a while, I'm liable to bust."

"Just don't be funny in there. Keep your hands in your pockets and stand near the door and make believe you're the toughest sonofabitch in the world. You understand?"

"You figure the spik might get rough?"

Benny forced a laugh. "Not this guy. He's scared of his own shadow. I want him to be scared of yours too, good and scared."

"What's so special—"

"Please, Joey, don't ask questions. This guy is special, that's all you gotta know. For Augie, Joey, do like I say."

The door on the third-floor landing was opened by a dark, fat woman, with large black eyes in a smooth olive face. Her dress was cut low, exposing huge flabby breasts. She hesitated, fear flickering across her face, when she recognized Benny.

"No home," she said. "Pedro go someplace."

Benny said, "Don't play games with me, Felice. I know Pedro is home."

A voice from behind her said, "Permit them entrance, Felice."

Benny pushed open the door and Joey followed him into the barren apartment. Except for a table and four chairs held together with black wire, and a daybed covered by a faded cloth, the room was empty. There was not even a picture to relieve the drab monotony of the dirty gray walls.

Joey looked around, unbelieving. There was poverty on Orchard Street but nothing like this. He felt suddenly uncomfortable as if he were trespassing in somebody's intimate life. He wished Benny would decide to leave, so they could return when the Puerto Ricans had put their house in order for visitors.

Pedro Gonzales was tall and lean, high cheekbones giving his yellow face a lean hungry look. He wore blue corduroy trousers, a stained T shirt which might at one time have been white. Two children, a boy of six and a girl of four, sat on the floor in the far corner, black eyes following Benny's movements as he took change out of his pocket, handed each a new silver dollar.

Pedro objected, crying in Spanish for the children to return the money. Benny gave him a look.

"Mind your own goddam business," he said. "Go on, kids, Uncle Benny says take."

Unsmiling, they accepted the coins, then stared at them as if trying to fathom their significance.

Pedro shouted, "Give back! Maria! Thomas! Give back!"

The children flung the coins away, one rolling under the daybed, the other landing at Joey's feet. The woman quickly took the children by the hand, led them into an adjoining room and gently closed the door.

Benny cried, "What I give the kids is none of your business, Pedro. What the hell's the matter with you?"

Pedro Gonzales drew himself up to his full height. Dark eyes smoldering, he said, "You don't come to give children *dineko*."

"What's that got to do with it?" Benny took a cigar out of his pocket, ripped off the cellophane and bit into the tobacco with venom. "When I was a kid if somebody handed me even a dime I'd be the happiest guy on the block. Only nobody gave me nothing. If I wanted something I hadda go out and steal it." He took a pad out of his jacket pocket. "You paying the hundred and twenty today?"

Pedro shook his head. "I no work two weeks."

"That's not my fault. You know the trouble with you? You're too goddam big. In your mind, noplace else. Get off your high horse, Pedro. You're nobody and when you're broke at the same time, you're in a black hole in the ground. I can get you on a ship tomorrow if you'll listen to me."

"No," Pedro said fiercely.

Benny shrugged. "It's your funeral. You could wipe off this debt, get a free work permit and a couple bucks in your pocket."

Pedro's eyes rolled. "I no want it."

"You don't have to holler. I'm trying to do you a favor. You like to live in this garbage, enjoy yourself. If I lived here I'd do something about it. Not for me, then for my wife and two kids. Or don't they mean that much to you?"

A combination of self-pity and anger in the back of his

dark eyes, Pedro cried, "Here I like. My wife, my children, they like too."

"Okay, pay me the hundred and twenty."

Pedro sucked in his breath. "I no work two weeks. Please, *por favor, señor*, you get me permit, I can get work, then I pay you."

Benny sneered. "You can't pay one-twenty, how you gonna pay for the permit?"

For a fee, Joey knew, Benny got probationary membership books and permit cards entitling the holders to receive jobs as merchant seamen at the hiring halls of the Maritime Union. Without these books and cards no one could be employed on a ship.

When Pedro didn't answer, Benny said, "I'll give you a break. Two hundred bucks for the book and card. I don't wanna make a penny on this deal. I just want you to get a job and make a dollar." Benny sounded sincere. "Pedro, you damn fool, one little favor."

Something desperate was growing in Pedro's expression. "You stop that, mister. I no do nothing bad, never."

Benny chewed through his cigar, took it out of his mouth, looked at the shredded tip, flung the cigar against the wall, from which it bounced onto the daybed.

Benny said, "I'm trying to help you, Pedro. So help me God, I'm trying to figure out something." He glanced at Joey. "The Boss should hear me now; he'd cut my tongue out. Pedro, I know how you can make money. If any of your spik friends have the cash, I can get them a book and a permit card. Then it'll cost two-fifty. I don't wanna make nothing on the deal. You keep fifty bucks. Get enough customers and you're in the clear."

Pedro stared blankly. "My friends no have so much American pesos." He fumbled in his pocket. "I give you interest, hokay? Twenty dollar—"

Joey wasn't accustomed to seeing Benny squirm. "Sorry, Pedro. You been payng the interest ten weeks now. The Boss wants the whole thing, the hundred plus the twenty interest."

Crumpled bills clutched in his fist, Pedro said helplessly, "I no got it."

Joey couldn't keep quiet any longer. "For cryin' out loud, Benny."

Benny whirled on him. "Didn't I tell you to keep your trap shut once we got in here?"

"If he pays the interest, what's the kick?"

"The Boss isn't gonna like this. So help me, Joey, you keep talking and I gotta tell how you screwed things up."

Joey pleaded, "Maybe I should go outside . . ."

Pedro was counting the money. "One dollar, two dollar . . ."

Felice came in, the two children clinging to her hands and stealing sly glances at Benny. From under the bed, she took a pair of sneakers and handed them to the boy, who sat down on the floor to put them on. The little girl came over to look up at Joey. Her face was dirty, a chocolate smear extending from her lips to her left ear. She smiled and when he grinned weakly, she wrapped her arms around his right leg and swung both thin legs around his ankles.

"Sixteen dollar," Pedro said, sweat beads forming on his creased forehead as he began to count silver coins.

Joey disentangled the little girl, turned her away from him, patted her rump. All friendliness gone, she sidled away, lips pressed tightly together, fighting the tears that filled her eyes.

Pedro said, "Eighteen dollar, sixty centavos."

Benny's jaw muscles worked convulsively. "For cryin' out loud, a year it takes to count off a lousy twenty bucks? My time's worth more than that." He didn't look at Joey. "You can get a heart attack watching a guy count nickels and dimes."

Joey's gaze shifted restlessly from the woman to the boy, struggling with his laces, then to the girl, still watching him.

Pedro said something in Spanish to Felice. Looking doubtful, she went out of the room.

"How much?" Joey exploded. "How much you short?"

Benny said, "He's got nineteen and a quarter."

Joey cried, "Take a gallon of blood outa him, Benny, you'll be even."

Benny said, "Lay off, Joey. God, if it was up to me . . ."

Joey said, "His wife don't have to go beggin' for a lousy seventy-five cents."

Pedro, indifferent, unresistant, said, "Pedro owe money, him pay."

Benny moved around the room in short, uneasy move-

ments until Felice returned, a smile on her cherubic face. Somewhere she'd borrowed seventy-five cents. Proud of her achievement, she laid the three quarters on the table.

Benny said to Joey, "Take the dough."

The breath jammed in Joey's throat. "You want it, you take it. I can't touch that kind of blood money."

Benny folded the bills, stuck them into his wallet, swept the coins from the table into his palm, dropped them into his coat pocket. A silver coin dropped on the floor but Benny made no move to pick it up. Pedro lifted the dime where it had rolled against the table leg, held it out to Benny.

"Next time," Benny shouted, "I want the hundred also." He slapped the coin out of Pedro's hand. "Don't make fun out of me, I don't like it. Remember: None of this damned interest. That's how my boss wants it, and I'm gonna have a helluva job explaining why I let you talk me out of it this time. All or nothing, next time. You *comprende* me, Pedro?"

Pedro said, "*Comprendo*. But how can I give you all that money if I no work?"

"That's your headache. You don't want to listen to me, work it out your own way. Smarten up, Pedro!" Turning quickly on his heel, he raced out of the house.

Joey stood trembling with wrath. "Crazy bastard," he shouted at Pedro. "Can't you listen to nobody? Look at those kids. When they eat last?" The room blurred and seemed to spin, then was still. "Crazy . . ." He yanked open the hall door, stopped to pull a handful of bills out of his trouser pocket and flung them at Pedro and went out.

I hope I hit the dumb bastard, he said to himself. I hope it hurts him so bad he'll cry his heart out—for his kids, for his wife, for the lousy dirty flat.

Out on the street, they walked in silence. When they reached the next corner, Benny said, "Every time I go up there my ulcers get so bad I could die."

"Then don't go there," Joey said. "That's easy."

"For you," Benny cried, "not for me. The Boss wants me to keep after those guys. If they don't pay, badger 'em. If they pay, lend 'em another fifty, another hundred."

Joey, puzzled, said, "They got it tough trying to pay it back so what's the percentage?"

"Some pay, some can't but make it up another way."

"How? That favor you wanted from Pedro—that would make up for the dough?"

Benny gave him a sour look. "Don't ask questions. Some day when Augie thinks you should know I'll take you in a corner and whisper the big secret in your potato ear. Right now, better you don't know."

Joey was too curious to let the matter drop. "Must be something pretty dirty."

"Shut up, Joey, will you? Nothing's dirty in the racket or everything is mud, depending on how you see it. Right now you got another job. Take Pat Masters and Big Ginio, go down to that rubber-stamp place on Fulton Street. There's a couple pickets blocking the sidewalk. Get rid of 'em."

Ten days later, during Joey's sixth week in Verde's organization, the same rubber-stamp manufacturer that Benny had protected against picketing, received three visitors: Benny Cantor, accompanied by Matt Green and Joey Koslo.

Benny walked in fresh and vigorous with anticipation. "Everybody out. This place is on strike until every sonofabitch joins Local 741 of the Stamp Manufacturers of America."

The proprietor, shaking, cried, "I never heard of Local 741."

Matt Green said, "You heard of it now. C'mon, you guys." He pushed a man already removing his apron. "Shake your ass."

Benny said to the proprietor, "Local 741 was formed this morning. Jamison Wachtel is the president. You got no vote in the matter. All your help joins or you might as well go out of business. Now shut up, Harnett. Cryin' on my shoulders don't help nobody."

Harnett mopped his face with a handkerchief. "I paid Verde plenty so we don't have a union shop."

"The Boss decided the workers need somebody to protect them so he's gonna see they're represented right. Sign or get out. How's your wife, Harnett? You got two kids? You ever expect to have three, don't aggravate the Boss. Live and let live, so we can all enjoy life. . . ."

As if snapped out of a dream, Joey's mind reverted to the

present. He sat up, his back against the tree, his shoulder touching Tina's.

Something vague stirred in his memory. "What did you say about Forrester?"

"I said a lot of things but you weren't listening."

He leaned over to kiss her cool cheek. "I was thinking of you and me, a long time ago."

Her eyes followed a tall boy with a peculiar walk, another man holding his arm possessively. "Mr. Forrester is worried about you."

He tried to kiss her again but she pulled away. Shrugging, he said, "Okay, so Forrester is worried about me."

"He's not the only one, Joey."

He bristled. "Nobody's gotta worry about Joey Koslo. I know what I'm doing every minute of the day and night."

Her eyes caught his and held them. "When was the last time you could face Mr. Forrester?"

"Face him?" He laughed harshly. "Who is he, my father confessor? Forrester's got no claim on me."

Her voice was softer now as she pleaded. "For me, Joey, go see him. Tell him what you've been telling me. Make him understand why you're still working for Verde."

Curtly, he said, "You're telling him, aren't you?"

"He doesn't believe me because I can't speak as convincingly as you can."

"Rip into me."

"I didn't mean that. . . . You don't want to talk to Mr. Forrester."

"Not until I got a case."

"You'll never have a case. Joey, it's no good. Me and you, we're batting our heads together and it's making me sick." The color was gone from her cheeks, shadows hollowed her eyes. "Joey, I want out."

"What the hell you talking about?"

She shook her head angrily. "Before I start to hate you, let's break it up. My Mom is talking about moving away from here, far away. Los Angeles, maybe. I think that would be the best thing in the world for both of us."

He took her arms, kissed her lips. There was no response.

She said, "In my heart I knew from the time you took that job with Benny, you wanted something cushy with nice easy money. But you had to salve your conscience. So

you made big speeches about your noble purpose in life. I knew you weren't the type, Joey. You couldn't inform against Verde or Benny or anybody else. You couldn't do it and we knew it all the time, didn't we, Joey?"

He closed his eyes so tight a muscle in his cheek twitched. "Someday you'll see. So far I done what I wanted. I kept my brother Duke out of it."

She stared at him. "I don't care about Duke. It's you I'm worried about."

"I need time, Tina. A couple months . . ."

She pushed herself up and stood over him. "I don't believe it, Joey. Every day I sit home and wonder if anything's happened to you. Do the police have you locked in a cell? Have a gang of hoods decided to get you out of the way? Where are you? What are you doing? Joey, quit now. I don't care any more about evidence and who gets put in jail to save humanity."

He couldn't look at her. "Just when I'm getting the evidence, I can't quit."

Tina's eyes flashed scornfully. "Don't give me that. You're making a lot of money now, aren't you, Joey? You've got plenty of shirts and ties and suits. You've refurnished half your apartment. You can't give that up. From now on money and excitement will be your life. You'll never quit."

Wearily, he got to his feet. "C'mon, I'll take you home."

She moved away from him. "I can find my own way. This is good-by, Joey. It's been nice . . . up to a point."

He saw the set of her jaw, the strength in every line of her mouth, and knew he had lost her. Without a word, hands deep in his pockets, he turned and went up the path toward the exit.

I'll show her, he cried to himself, someday they'll see, her and Forrester, they'll believe it when it's in the newspapers in black and white. Where's she get that stuff, I'll never quit? Hell, it ain't worth arguing about.

Then his shoulders sagged, as he thought: Sure, there's nothing to argue about because she's right. All the way down the line you sold out to Verde, Joey. You're one of them now.

For Joey, during the week that followed, each day passed with monotonous regularity; each evening, thinking of Tina, was full of aching loneliness; the nights were restlessly

long as he lay staring into the darkness. Saturday, unable to stand any more, he walked down to Attorney Street with the hope of convincing Tina of his intentions of quitting the gang at the first available opportunity.

He stood outside her building for a long minute before he could get up enough courage to go in. In the dim twenty-five-watt ceiling light, the hall was full of shadows. He heard subdued voices from behind the stairs, a man whispering, and abruptly, like a knife ripping his insides, Tina's laugh.

That guy is Mel Pollen and that means you've really lost her, Joey.

Anguish mushroomed inside him as he backed out, stumbling on the street step.

Go in, Joey, have it out with her, once and for all. Nobody takes Tina away from you. She's yours forever.

He leaned against the stone stoop and breathed deeply to loosen the tightness in his chest.

I ain't lost her. Nobody's taking her away. Go in, Joey. . . . Tomorrow . . . not now. I don't feel up to it . . . Take him, Joey, that long-legged freak with earlaps, one kick in the pants and he's out. . . .

The tall figure coming down the hall was vaguely familiar, tall and bony and thin as a slat. Joey couldn't see his features in the semidarkness but he knew there must be a happy grin on Mel's handsome face. Now the mouth was visible and Joey saw the lipstick smear. The ache became agony.

"I oughtta beat your brains out," Joey cried.

Mel stopped short, fear skimming across his lean, ascetic face. "Wait a minute. Let's not get excited."

"Tina belongs to me. You got no right—"

Mel held out his hand in a patronizing gesture. "Let's talk it over . . ."

Joey slapped the hand away. "Hit me," he growled, his body hooking into a crouch. "Go ahead. Hit me."

Mel backed against the letter boxes. "I don't—"

Heat shimmered in waves before Joey's eyes as he lashed out, ripping Mel's body with power punches, then bringing his blows up to the head.

"Hit me, hit me," he said over and over, the words slurred, saliva flecking his lips.

Then Mel was down on the dirty marble floor, looking like a bundle of discarded rags. Suddenly cool, Joey stood over him, aghast at what he'd done.

"God, Joey!" It was Tina, outrage in her every word. "What the devil's got into you. If you've hurt Mel, so help me, you'll be sorry."

He rolled his shoulders and said lamely, "He had no right muzzling around with you."

Her eyes flashed hotly. "What I do is none of your business."

"You don't understand," he said, not looking at her. "A guy gets mad . . ."

Clearly and sharply she said, "Tough guy Joey Koslo, beating up a defenseless man. But I've got to give you a little credit." Her scorn tore at his heart. "At least you didn't call your gang, like in the old days."

"You don't understand," he said again. He bent to lift Mel up but Tina moved in on him, tiny fists clenched, a bundle of fury ready to pounce.

"You touch him again, Joey, and so help me God, I'll go to the police."

"Aah!" He waved her away. "I just wanted to help him."

"Go help your friends, your Augie Verde and his boys. They need muscle men like you. I don't want you around me ever again."

He stared at her, not believing his ears. He licked his lips. "You don't understand. I hadda jump this guy. I can't explain, just that I ain't got much that's all mine and when somebody tries to take away the little I got . . . all a guy like me knows is to hit."

He stalked abruptly out of the hallway and disappeared into the street.

When she turned around, Mel was pushing himself up. She took his arm. "You all right?"

He held his jaw, winced. "I'll never be all right. Tina, you're shaking."

"I'm just burned up," she cried. "That muscle-bound hood!"

Mel dabbed his split upper lip with his pocket handkerchief. "It'll take more than a beating to make me give you up, Tina. I love you too much."

"You're sure you're all right?"

"I'll live, no thanks to that gangster."

"He won't ever bother us again," she said firmly. "I promise you that. I'll see you tomorrow, Mel."

He nodded. "Around three. I've got to study for exams all morning. You'll think over what I asked you tonight?"

She looked up into Mel's face and a sudden wave of compassion swept over her. "I don't have to think about it," she cried. "We'll get married in February, right after you graduate from L.I.U."

He said quietly, "I'd rather you really thought it over."

"I said I'd marry you. Don't you want me? You're supposed to show some enthusiasm."

He took her in his arms. "Right now you're hot and bothered."

"I know what I'm doing, Mel. I love you. That satisfy you?"

He grinned. "Yes, darling."

"Kiss me, Mel, hold me tight, real tight. . . ."

When he'd gone, Tina went upstairs in slow, measured steps. In February she'd be a bride, Mel's bride. That's the way she wanted it. Now she could see so clearly! She and Joey had been a mismatch, kids thinking love was just an hour in the bedroom, making sex such a habit they couldn't kick it off.

Finished, once and for all, she and Joey . . .

Momma sat in her favorite chair watching the late movie. Her feet up on a hassock, Momma looked comfortable as she munched from the giant bag of potato chips in her lap.

Tina leaned back against the closed door. "I'm getting married, Momma—Mel and I, after he graduates."

Momma shoved a fistful of chips into her big mouth, her jowels shaking as she chewed. Tina dropped her bag on the table, snapped off the television set.

Momma protested, "Clark Gable and Jean Harlow!"

"Momma, I'm getting *married*."

Momma stared blankly, lifted a potato chip to her mouth. In a burst of anger, Tina yanked the bag out of her hand, ripping the cellophane and scattering chips over the floor.

"Look what you done!" Momma cried.

"Momma, didn't you hear me? Mel and I are getting married."

"Mel?" Her fat face beamed. "Why didn't you say so?"

Oh, it's wonderful. He's a nice boy. He'll make a living for you."

"I know, Momma."

"He'll give you a nice home. We'll have a nice wedding in a nice restaurant. You'll be dressed as a bride and I'll wear a gown. Tina, from now on, I stop eating. I'll bet for your wedding I'll get into a size sixteen dress. You'll see. Oh, Tina, I'm so happy. . . . Might as well finish the rest of the chips, no need wasting good money. But starting tomorrow . . ."

Tina handed her mother what was left of the bag. "That's right, Momma. No sense wasting them." She flicked on the television. "And I don't want you to miss Clark Gable."

Her father came out of the bedroom in his underwear. Blinking against the light, he said, "For Jeez' sake, you gonna sit up all night?"

"When I'm ready," Momma said.

"Every damn night! I'll smash that television."

Tina went into her room and closed the door but their angry voices came through. She was glad Mel had never heard Momma and Poppa having one of their arguments, when the swearing and cursing rolled like thunder. Joey was used to their senseless bickering. In fact, sometimes the crazy fool had egged them on.

Abruptly she went to the drawer and dug Joey's picture out of the wooden box. The photo glistened with the Scotch tape she'd used to mend it. In a frenzy she ripped it again, yanked open the window and flung the pieces into the street.

She thought: As quickly as those pieces reach the gutter, that's how fast Joey will be out of my heart.

Chapter 20

About forty men and a dozen specially invited women were celebrating Augie Verde's birthday in the large outer office. A big bartender with a false mustache and vaseline-

slicked hair to simulate a barman of the twenties stood behind a table and dispensed drinks to order. Along the walls, other tables were heaped with platters of cold cuts and fish, hot and cold hors d'oeuvres, salads, fruits, desserts and bread.

As Joey entered the room, the crowd welcomed him with exultant howls, handshakes and back-slapping.

Joey cried, "You guys sure got a load on. You ain't seen me all day? What's with this hello routine?"

Matt Green, lips wet with slobber, said, "Joey, pal, you gotta *lota* catchin' up to do. Hey, give Joey a drink."

Joey grinned. "I'll catch up. Hey, bub, a big glass of ginger ale. No chaser."

They all laughed at the stale joke about Joey's refusal to touch alcoholic beverages.

"Hey, Joey," Matt Green cried in a raucous voice. "You don't smoke, you don't drink, you don't gamble. What the hell do you do?"

Joey said, innocently, "There's somethin' else?"

One of the girls, a shapely brunette who danced in the front line at a nightclub, pulled back Joey's head and kissed him with damp and exaggerated passion.

Drunkenly, she screamed, "Joey, there *is* something else!"

"Hey, bartender," Joey cried, "another ginger ale, and easy on the ice. Those mixed drinks can kill you."

He saw Benny Cantor come out of Verde's office. Benny looked unhappy as he mopped his forehead with a pocket handkerchief before pushing his way to the bartender. Quickly he downed a double Scotch. When Benny ordered a second drink, Joey knew his friend must be really upset.

As Benny pushed through the crowd, his eyes darting this way and that, Joey had a peculiar feeling he was being sought.

Matt Green was playing to a large audience. "I'm stompin' this guy's face into nothin' and his wife starts hollerin' and screamin', her big belly jumpin' like she was in the ninth month. You'd think it was her face I was kickin' in . . ."

Benny tapped Joey on the shoulder. "I been lookin' for you. Meet me up on the roof in ten minutes."

Joey said, "Sounds bad."

Benny mopped his face again. "It's a job, that's all you gotta remember."

"You worried about me, pal?"

"No, me. 'Cause I gotta go with you. See you upstairs."

When Joey stepped onto the tarred roof, Benny was waiting for him, a cigar dangling from his lips.

"Took you long enough," Benny said.

Joey could see a car speeding across the Brooklyn Bridge. The lights seemed brighter on the Brooklyn side of the East River.

Joey looked up at the starry sky. "See any Russian moons zipping by? How many Sputniks they got up there?"

"What the hell is this?" Benny cried. "A joke or somethin'? Joey, we got a big job—you, me and Matt Green."

"You're wearing out a good handkerchief on your face."

Benny said, "It ain't the biggest job, Joey—just that I never got mixed up in something lousy like spilling acid on a guy."

"Acid?"

"Oh, I seen it done but I wasn't in on it before."

"For cryin' out loud, Benny."

Benny's eyes had a glazed, feverish look. "It's just a job, understand? Matt Green will finger the guy and give you the bottle. You dump it on the bum's neck. We don't want him blinded or anything like that. This is to be just a warning. I'll wait in a car on the corner—"

"Jeez, Benny, this ain't for me. I'd louse it up."

"Bellyachin' will get you nothin', believe me."

"Suppose the guy is blinded? After all, I fling the stuff and run, don't I? Who says I'm a major-league pitcher?"

Benny clasped his head with both hands and rocked. "Don't aggravate me, Joey, please. Can't you see I'm sick now? You tryin' to kill me altogether?"

Joey said, "Maybe we're killing each other. Who is this guy?"

"It's not for you to know. Believe me, you're better off."

"How come he earns the acid bath?"

A wind stirred up eddies of dust on the roof. Benny lifted his jacket collar for protection. "The guy is running around with the wife of Augie's friend."

"Aw, come on, Benny."

"That reason's good enough for your purposes."

"No," Joey said with finality. "If I'm gonna do this job,

I gotta get the feeling . . . maybe the guy deserves it."

"Take my word for it," Benny said persuasively. "He deserves every drop."

"Like that newspaper labor columnist that other mob blinded?"

"There's no comparison, Joey."

"There could be. The guy who handled that job got a big reward from his boss, six feet of cemetery ground. That could happen to me, couldn't it, Benny?"

Benny waved his hand in a gesture of disgust. "That ginger ale must've softened your brain. That other punk screwed up a simple job. He got acid on his face and became a marked man for the F.B.I. The mob hadda close his mouth. In this case, I know you won't screw anything up."

"You know."

"Secondly, you ain't tryin' to blind nobody, just give him a little something to remember you by."

"I know a song title like that. Too bad I don't know the words so we can sing it together."

"Third: this guy is a nobody. No F.B.I. is coming in on this. Nobody's gonna give a damn. Besides, this bastard's got a yellow streak a mile deep. Burn him and he won't even tell the cops. One little burn and he'll come to Augie with his pants down."

Joey's eyes narrowed. "He's so yellow, how come Augie can't scare him into coming by threatening him?"

"Because he's stupid." Emphasizing each letter with a jab of his forefinger, Benny spelled, "S-T-U-P-I-D, stupid."

"Sure," Joey said. "He's stupid, we're smart. Suppose I said the hell with it, Benny, go get somebody else? Suppose my stomach just couldn't take that kind of kicks?"

Benny said, "Matt Green has the details—when the guy leaves home, where he goes, where he eats, everything we gotta know." He smiled thinly. "There's only one way you can beat this job: go off the roof now, and land on your head."

The party was still in full swing when Joey returned downstairs. Verde came out of his office, steely authority in his stride, his bald head glistening pinkly under the strong lights. A discordant cheer went up, followed by spirited hand-clapping when the guests realized their host had finally appeared. Verde bowed, his tall figure quivering with heartiness.

"Drink up, everybody," he cried. "I've got a special crew to cart home any drunk who can't make it on his own power."

Somebody began to sing "Happy Birthday" and the rest joined in at a different lines, finishing the last few bars in fair harmony. The brunette who had kissed Joey sidled over to Verde and rubbed coyly up against him. He turned to stare at her coldly. Matt Green hurried to pull her away but he was too late. She bent over to kiss Verde, whereupon he put his hand flat over her face and shoved, sending her sprawling.

Verde said, "Somebody take the blonde home."

Two men emerged from the crowd, lifted her, kicking and screaming, and carried her out of the room. Verde waved the crowd to the bartender's table and again a cheer went up.

Matt Green whispered to Joey, "Sometimes I think the Boss is nuts. Jeez, if I had his chances with them dames! You'd never get me to come to work. I'd just lay in bed, a broad on each side of me."

Joey said, "Augie's got a wife."

Green gave him a quick look. "Real family man, that Augie. Only I wouldn't let a family stop me. A broad on each side, one in the middle . . ."

A glass of ginger ale in his hand, Joey finally got close enough to Verde to catch his ear.

"I gotta talk to you, Augie."

Verde drank a pale yellow liquid out of a tall glass. "Not now, Joey. See me tomorrow."

"It's got to be tonight, now."

Eyes that were unfriendly chips of green ice gave Joey's face a quick appraisal. "Why don't you switch to Coca-Cola, Joey? Coke won't give you a hangover."

"It'll only take a minute."

The bushy eyebrows twitched. "I said tomorrow, Joey. Tonight, you hang around Benny just in case he needs you to wipe his nose."

"One lousy minute!"

Verde's hand tightened whitely around his glass. "Sixty big seconds and I haven't got the time. Joey?"

Joey looked back at him. "Yeah, chief?"

"Maybe I know what you're trying to say but I can't listen. Benny's your boss. You take all your orders from

him. It's very important to me, Joey. I don't want to promise you anything but whatever it is Benny has in mind for you tonight, the success of the mission will bring you one step closer to a bigger job. Someday, Joey, you're gonna work with me directly. I'm not gonna say any more."

Joey said, "About this job—"

Verde let his anger show. "I don't know what you're talking about and I don't want to know. Go say hello to your brother Duke."

Mouth wide in surprise, Joey turned to see Duke coming through the open door. People turned and stared briefly, then went back to drinking. Benny called out a hello. Duke waved self-consciously.

Joey cried, "What's Duke doing here?"

Verde said, "Anybody who wants to celebrate my birthday is welcome. Duke, go grab yourself a shot."

Duke waved his hand again. "Sure will. Hi, Joey."

Verde slapped Joey's back. "This is my party, boy, so don't spoil it by getting me sore. Joey, you know all I'd have to do is give Benny the signal and we could get somebody else to replace you for tonight. There are a dozen kids who'd be tickled to do Augie Verde a favor."

A new watchfulness in his eyes, Joey stared at Duke in conversation with Benny Cantor.

Verde continued, "But I don't want anybody else. I want you, Joey. That clear?"

Joey nodded. "Clear enough."

Somebody took Verde's arm and steered him away. Benny's raucous voice was ordering two Scotches-and-sodas.

Duke said, "Just a drop of Scotch." He winked at Joey. "I gotta keep in condition."

"Stop conning me," Joey cried, angrily.

Duke's eyes opened in surprise. "I bumped into Augie yesterday. He said it'd be okay if I came up with a friend or two to celebrate his birthday. Something wrong?"

"Yeah. Everything. So where's your friend or two?"

Duke grinned. "Nobody was around so I came myself."

"Isn't Augie taking a chance with the cops on your tail?"

Duke blinked. "What cops? You mean about Charlie Patterson?"

Joey nodded. "They figure you killed Charlie so they'll

be tailing you till they pin a Murder-One rap on you."

Duke scowled. "They don't figure nothing. It's in the record, accidental death. They ain't come near me again."

"What's in the record and what's in Kale's mind is two different things."

"I'm free and clear."

"That's what you think."

"So does Augie; he told me so." Eyes wide with sudden understanding, he cried, "Everybody knows I'm innocent, except you. That's why you're doing the thinking for the cops."

"What I think don't make no difference."

Resentment slurred his words. "My own brother! How do you like that! The cops say no, you say yes—lock my brother up, sit him in the hot seat!"

Joey's eyes were troubled. "What kind of guy you think I am?"

"After what you tried to pull with the gang, you tell me."

"Can't you forget that?"

"No." He took a deep breath. "I didn't kill Charlie. I don't know how he died. For God's sake, Joey, I wasn't even there. I was sleeping down the club when Charlie's supposed to have died. You don't believe that, go to the devil."

Satisfied, Joey grinned. "Okay, don't get so excited. I believe you. Honest, Duke."

Duke shook his head. "I don't want you believing I'd do such a thing. After all, someday you and me are gonna work together for Augie."

Joey shook his head. "That's the time I'll blow our brains out—yours, then mine."

All friendliness vanished from Duke's face. "So we're back to that. Look, Joey. I told you before: butt out! Don't start to push your weight around in something that's none of your business. You're in this mob so you can't afford to preach. You got it nice and soft, why can't I?"

"Nice and soft? Duke, you don't understand—"

"Lemme find out for myself, okay? Maybe you don't fit into this kind of setup," he said shrewdly, "so it bothers you. Maybe I'd fit in better, and you don't like that. I'm hungry, Joey. I think I could eat a sandwich."

As Joey watched Duke move to the food counter, Benny touched his arm. "Let's put on the feed bag. We'll need

somethin' in our bellies. Soon's I make a telephone call, we'll be on our way."

Joey said, "You go on and eat." His own belly ached already. "I can't eat before a lot of action."

Chapter 21

August Verde stood in the doorway and watched the party breaking up, nodding a mechanical good night, the fixed smile never deviating one degree. He saw Benny hang up the receiver and walk over to whisper in Joey's ear. Joey's back stiffened suddenly as if he'd been given a command to stand at attention. Joey said something and Benny snapped at him. Nodding, Joey followed Benny out of the room. In his imagination, Verde could see them going down the stairs and entering the car Matt Green had stolen for the occasion.

Tugging at his dented nose to ease the sudden itch that always came when excitement was impending, Verde returned to his office and stretched out full length on the couch.

He'd known Joey Koslo would rebel at tonight's assignment. Perhaps the kid wasn't ready for this type of work. At the beginning every job had bothered Joey, but little by little, so subtly that not even the kid realized what was happening, he'd become indoctrinated, more immunized to the sight of blood and pain on broken bodies. In time Joey Koslo could be of far greater use to the organization than the collecting of loans or running of crap games.

Verde liked Joey. The kid would never be found in an isolation booth on a quiz program but he wasn't stupid. Ignorant perhaps, but, as long as he could think for himself and had common sense, he wasn't a dummy. Also, Joey had a zipper over his mouth that couldn't be pried open. On that Verde would bet his right arm. Then again, Joey Koslo had guts. Not because he could walk into a ringed spotlight and slug it out with an opponent—hell, hungry guys would do anything for a buck—but how many so-

called rough and tough guys, after spending a couple months in a hospital from a terrific beating, would, at the first opportunity, go after one of the aggressors and almost annihilate him? One in a million. The rest would have had the beating so etched on their minds they'd shake like an epileptic just thinking about it.

And Joey had the know-how and the savvy to take care of himself or anybody else he was assigned to guard. Any hood could learn to pull a trigger without blowing off his own hand, but Joey could fight, take a guy out with one punch, and had a powerful pair of quick legs to cover ground.

The kid had everything . . . or he would in time, for there still was one little flaw that had to be eliminated: Joey had a conscience. That the kid could do without. Kill the conscience, and Joey would go places alongside Verde, a step at a time up the pyramid made by the thousands of workers in the organization.

That he, Verde, could destroy Joey's conscience, he had no doubt. Slowly but surely Verde was applying the novacaine of personal contact and experience to the nerves that produced the conscience pangs. Tonight's job was just another step, perhaps the step next to the last, in toughening and hardening the man's feelings. Then one day Verde would assign Joey the ultimate job—killing—and after that he could step into the job Verde had planned for him ever since he'd come out of prison, his personal hatchet-man and bodyguard.

A man stuck his head into the room. "Car's ready, Boss, if you are."

Verde swung his feet off the couch. "Ready, Chess."

Verde made it a rule to go home after a day's work, where he could relax with a Martini, the emotions and mental tension of his working life locked away in a separate compartment. Where he could forget, if only for a few hours, the hostilities and animosities his business was bound to create. Where he could escape the clashing personalities he dealt with every day, the suspicions and resentments of the ruthless men who surrounded him.

If on a rare occasion business kept Verde in town overnight, he never failed to call Rose, his wife, to tell her not to wait up for him. Every time he missed a night at home,

he had the feeling a few precious hours had been lost out of his life.

He loved Rose very much.

As always, Chess and Hilly sat in the front of the bullet-proof Cadillac, Verde alone in the back. Behind them the Edsel, with one of the regulars, Matt Green or Pat Johnson or Tarzan Wertz, would be following closely. Upon reaching Wantaugh, Verde would get out of the Cadillac, transfer to the Edsel and, while the three men returned to New York, their boss would drive home to his garage, just another businessman returning home from a long day's work.

In the morning, after telephoned arrangements, Verde would drive the Edsel to the appointed place, where the Cadillac and men would be waiting for the trip to the city.

This night, as on all the other nights, everything ran smoothly.

Verde owned a fifty-thousand-dollar, nine-room, brick-and-stucco house that sat on an acre of land. Although Verde would have preferred a house of more austere magnificence befitting a man of his station, respect for Rose's wishes had curtailed his desire to spend his money on creating the showplace of Long Island.

"I don't want it," Rose had said. "The children don't need it. Who do you expect to entertain that you need a mansion? Besides, darling, a modest home will make people less curious. That's why we came out here, remember, to be just another family moving in, just normal average people."

The garage door closed for the night, Verde glanced at the hedges bordering his land, the chrysanthemums, rust and yellow and white, planted alongside the house. He walked to the rosebush, now almost denuded, hugging the southwest corner of the house. Sighing regretfully, he wished he hadn't listened to Rose insisting she do the planting. Had he hired a professional gardener as he'd wanted, the roses might still be in bloom. True, this was November and there'd already been a few bitter, frosty nights, but shouldn't roses, the most beautiful flower in the world, grow the year round? If not, then the horticulturists were wasting their time playing tick-tack-toe, when they should be experimenting to find a hardier strain of rose that would grow winter and summer, come snow, rain or hail. It was a crime to let roses wither and die just because

of the seasons. He made a mental note to speak to the Wantaugh florist. There must be a winter rose. . . .

Tomorrow, he promised himself, he'd get up early and spend a couple hours fooling around the chrysanthemums. Rose, in her delicate condition, shouldn't putter around the garden. She could easily trip and fall. . . . He remembered that last miscarriage, when Rose had lost what would have been a boy—the agony and fright in her sensitive face, the dry sorrow in her eyes afterward, the long nights when he'd lain beside her and watched her staring into the darkness, eating herself out because she had failed to grant him his one great wish, a son. He felt the chill of the night and hurried around the house.

The aluminum rural-type letter box said in black letters:
AUGUST T. VICTOR.

He frowned. Every time he saw that box it upset him. Why should Augie Verde have to live under an alias? He hadn't liked the idea from the start but, again, Rose had made her point and won it. In this hick town, the very people who bellyached about discrimination would turn instantly on Augie Verde because they didn't approve of his way of making a living. August T. Victor, on the other hand, could live in Wantaugh a respected citizen, known for his generous donations to his own Catholic Church, to Rose's synagogue and to the neighbors' Protestant churches. Nobody cared where Victor got his money, so long as he shelled it out. Augie Verde's money was dirty and couldn't be accepted—not openly, that is.

He let himself into the house and closed the door gently behind him. He dropped his coat and hat on a straight-backed chair under the mellow Gobelin tapestry, and walked noiselessly along the fawn-colored carpeting into the living room.

"Augie?" A short stocky woman rose from the couch, her silk robe tight around her enormous middle. Rose always carried big. In the seventh month you'd think she was ready to drop the kid any minute. "Hello, darling."

He kissed her lips. "I didn't wake you up?"

It was the usual solicitous question and got the usual reassuring answer. "No, I was awake."

He flopped on the couch, opened his collar. "How are my little dolls?"

"Sleeping soundly, I hope."

Angelina was seven, Rita six, and in two months there would be a son—of that he had no doubt. It had to be. Girls were all right—God knows, he loved his angels—but a man wasn't a man without a son. Carmine Lund, an old buddy from bootlegging days now boss of the Brooklyn Gowanus area, had three girls and everybody looked with derision on the tough guy. At least it seemed that way to Verde because that was how he had felt when Carmine announced another female addition to the family. Somehow when you thought of a man with a lot of sons, you thought of him as virile, and powerful; anybody who could make nothing but daughters must be soft and effeminate.

Verde said, "Rose, you give the donation to the church?"

Somber gray eyes smiled at him. "Two hundred dollars."

He frowned. "At a time like this you should've made it five hundred at least. You tell Father D'Alessandro when I get my son he gets the biggest stained-glass window he ever saw for that new church."

She kissed his cheek, radiance in her eyes. "I already did last week, remember? I also told my rabbi that if I gave you a son, you would buy him another Torah."

He chuckled. "It figures. That's a deal."

He had never objected to her insistence upon attending religious services at the synagogue or to the large Jewish star she wore as a gesture of defiance (it seemed to him) in the predominantly Gentile neighborhood. Rose had come from an Orthodox Hebrew family—except for that brother of hers, Benny Cantor, who had no religion—and the last thing he would think of denying her was the right to worship as she pleased. If it made her happy, and sometimes he wasn't sure it did, it was all right with him.

Rose, on the other hand, never objected, by word or sign, to his taking the children to church on Sunday. Yet, sometimes, sitting in church, thinking of Rose back home alone, he wondered if her eyes were as clear and dry and radiant as they looked when she came out to welcome her family home from Mass.

He stirred on the couch. Rose squeezed his hand. "I'll get you a drink. You have a nice day?"

Verde wondered how many years had passed since she'd asked him that question.

When Verde had first met Rose at that benefit dance, he

had been president of Local 162 of the Watchmakers' Union and drawing two hundred dollars a week for the title. Manny Willis, Verde's former boss—his bullet-ridden body was destined to be found stuffed in the sewer where Verde had placed it—had given the framed charter hanging on the hook of his office wall to Verde for services rendered, thereby bestowing on Verde full dictatorial powers in that specific local. It had been that simple to become head of a union local—a charter off a wall.

After Rose had consented to marry him, in a moment of weakness he had blurted out the story of his activities, past and present. Even though he feared the shy and sensitive girl might leave him, he loved her enough to want to be honest with her. This is who I am, what I am and what I will be, he told her in effect, and I love you very much.

For Rose it was too late to back out. Hopelessly in love, she married him and in her way tried to reform him. In time, realizing that this was his life and that he would not give up the money, the excitement, the kicks even if he could, she had stopped trying. Not only had she ceased referring to his business activities, she had refused to let him bring his outside life into their home, either by conversation or through visiting friends.

He hadn't minded not bringing mob friends into the house, for he had enough acquaintances in the vicinity who dropped in for a drink, neighbors whose visits he returned occasionally. Besides, looking at it objectively, he knew he had no real friends in the mob. Servants, yes; friends, no. These so-called friends were constantly fingering him over mentally, their blank eyes probing for a chink in his armor, ready to pounce at the first smell of blood.

Verde had succeeded in not bringing his problems home except for that one occasion he'd come storming into the newly decorated living room and smashed half the furniture. That was the day he'd taught Piggy Meyers a lesson on what happens to stool pigeons. Attending to the job personally, Verde had put an icepick through both Meyers' eyes, and after mutilating the body to show the world Meyers had died lacking the assets of a man, he'd dumped the naked body in the gutter on Clinton Street, in front of the police precinct where Meyers had sung his song that very morning. Still angry, Verde had come home and taken out the dregs of his wrath on the furniture.

Biting her lower lip in her effort to keep from spilling it, Rose came across the floor with his Martini.

After handing him the drink, Rose licked a drop from her fingers. "Easy," he grinned. "That boy of mine is liable to get drunk and start kicking again. Angelina work her two-wheeler all right?"

Rose sat down beside him. "She fell off twice."

His forehead wrinkled, he placed his glass on a tray. "Whyn't you tell me?"

"Just a few scratches around the kneecap."

"You call the doctor? You gotta be careful about things like that."

She laughed and kissed his cheek. "She'll live. Coming to bed, Augie?" She took his arm and pressed her face against it. "This is a good night for sleeping."

"In a little while," he said. "I expect a phone call, then I'll be up. Oh, don't worry, this isn't business. Just a friend. Go on, now. I'll join you before you climb into bed."

"All right, Augie. I'll wait up for you."

"I wish you wouldn't, baby. If you're tired . . ."

"I'm not a bit sleepy. This life of doing nothing isn't for me, you know that. I wish I could get it over with so I could get rid of that maid. I don't like the way she cleans."

Augie nodded. "That figures too. Nobody's gonna do the job you do on this house. You inherited the cleaning mania from your mom."

Minutes after she'd left, he could still see the worry and anxiety that darkened her eyes. Lately, it had become a perpetual look, as if she had an evil premonition. Knowing how Manny Willis had died, and that he, Augie, had taken Willis' place, there would always be the fear that someday somebody with a quick trigger finger might come after his own job.

He shook himself. The hell with that stuff. She'd never understand that Verde was in solid with the organization. In a couple months, six at the most, he would step up a plateau on the pyramid, one jump nearer the apex where sat the three big men who controlled the whole country and strategic parts of the world.

How long had it been since he was one of the bums swarming around the base of the pyramid?

He lighted a cigarette and after a couple puffs, killed it in

the tray. He got up and made himself another drink and sipped it slowly, killing time, waiting, waiting. Benny should call soon. "The watch runs good," he'd say and Verde would know the boys had done their job. That they would he had no doubt. Benny and Matt were good men. Joey—he'd be good too. Verde had the utmost confidence in him.

But suppose Benny called and said, "I've got a flat tire"? Suppose things got screwed up?

Verde picked up another cigarette, crushed it. It would be better for McNimmo if he just got the acid on his face or neck and took the hint. Otherwise Verde would have to get a lot rougher; McNimmo'd get the knife across the face. Then if he were still stubborn, he'd have to die, quickly, violently.

The phone rang sharply. Verde glanced at his watch. It was two o'clock. Benny's voice was clear, triumphant.

"The watch runs good," he said and hung up.

Verde laughed to himself. The works were in, that's why the watch ran good. I hope he got plenty of acid, a big dose right in his eyes.

Verde went into the children's room. The night light was on. Rita was afraid of the dark. All her life she'd become frightened when the lights were turned off. The children were fast asleep, Angelina in the bed, long dark hair scattered over the pillow, Rita still using a crib, clutching a chunk of blue blanket, the tip wet where she'd chewed on it before finding solace in her thumb. He pushed a few strands of brown hair out of Rita's eyes, bent over to kiss her forehead. She stirred, almost lost her thumb, found it, and for a few seconds the smacking sounds were loud and wet.

He lifted the blanket an inch to cover Angelina's throat. When he kissed her cheek she didn't move and his heart beating with pride, he thought: My big girl, nothing bothers her.

Carefully, he tiptoed out of the room.

Chapter 22

You remember how once you and the gang busted into Seward High and in the chem lab Crazy Louie started throwing bottles against the wall and some of the stuff got on your clothes and all of a sudden you had big holes in your shirt and pants where the acid had eaten away the material like a horde of hungry moths. All of a sudden there was this itch on the back of your hand, like somebody touched a hot blade to your skin, quick pain, sharp and breath-catching, and you howled and ran out of the school. Later you washed the hand but an ugly sore formed and when that was gone a scar stayed with you all your life.

All because of one little drop of acid.

Matt Green came out of the bar and grill. Joey, hidden in the shadows of a doorway, moved into view. A low murky ceiling had settled over the city. Any minute the rain would come down.

Green said, "He's in there, all right. Go grab yourself a corner booth where you can see the bar. I'll finger him for you. Make it five fingers on his right shoulder."

His gloved hand came out of his pocket. Joey's hand closed around the vial and in his mind he could feel the heat of the acid burning through the glass, through his gloved palm. Quickly he stuffed the bottle into his topcoat pocket and went into the bar. Not looking around, he made for the booth in the corner, laid his hat on the seat beside him, unbuttoned his coat but didn't remove it. He reached for the menu and when his hand shook, decided to forget the glossy card.

A dozen people lined the bar, eight men, four women, their voices a pleasant drone of sound. He wondered who the man was. Just a little acid. It didn't have to be the whole vial. Hell, must be an ounce in there, at least, maybe one and a half. A little burn that'd make him howl for a

couple minutes, and for everybody to see a sore on his neck.

Or on his face or in his eyes . . .

Matt Green came into the bar and Joey squirmed in his seat. Joey looked up at the waiter standing at his elbow and, reaching for the menu, decided against it.

"Roast beef on rye," Joey said, "no gravy."

"Would you like something to drink?"

"Drink?" He stared dumbly. "Yeah, sure. Coke. Coke and rye."

The waiter moved out of his vision and Matt Green, stiff-jointed and stocky, filled his view. Green stood next to a man talking to a girl half his age, a big man with a long chin and hanging jowls. Green placed a hand on the man's shoulder and said something. Without looking back, the man pulled the pretzel bowl over to Green and continued his conversation with the girl. Green took a pretzel, turned his back to the bar and walked out into the street.

This is the man.

You got crap in your blood, Joey? All you gotta do is be strong enough to pull a little cork. The rest will come easy. Benny will be waiting on the corner, ready to take off and when you're at a safe distance he'll call the Boss and give him the code sentence and it'll be all over.

Joey jumped. "What?"

The waiter said, "Shall I mix the drink for you?"

"No, I'll fix it myself."

The waiter gone, Joey stared at the whisky jigger, the bottle of Coke, the plastic mixer sticking out of the tall glass with the three ice cubes. Slowly he poured the Coke into the tall glass, looking around him. Satisfied no one was watching, he poured the whisky under the table. He looked up into the waiter's accusing eyes and the blood drained out of his rough face.

He stared at the sandwich the waiter placed before him. "I don't like crappy whisky," he said weakly. "I like Canadian."

The waiter's voice had a disappointed note. "Four Roses is a good drink."

"I like Canadian."

Joey knew this was all wrong, focusing attention on himself. Now the waiter would remember him, identify his pic-

ture in the rogue's gallery, and he didn't know which made him sicker, the thought of spilling acid over a man or going back to prison. He sipped the Coke, not touching the sandwich.

The man had a hearty laugh.

It's forced, Joey, it's phony. Who is he? Did Benny say he had a family? A wife? Kids? Maybe this blonde, this pretty little thing with big eyes and pouting smile, is his wife. Or his sweetheart. Maybe he's got a wife and a sweetheart.

Gradually his nerves tightened once more.

Maybe this girl is only a kid. Yeah, she looks like a kid. Seventeen, maybe eighteen. Maybe the sonofabitch is no damn good. Maybe he deserves a dose of acid right down his neck.

What's it to you, Joey?

He was shaking again, the cubes in the glass tinkling so loudly he set the glass back on the table.

The less you know about The Man the better. Invite him over and learn the story of his life and he stops being a stranger. You can't hurt somebody you know, but if you don't know the guy from a hole in the ground you're not gonna worry your head off. There's a big difference. Like in China, a million guys and their families get wiped out by flashflood, murder and hunger. You worry about it? Of course not. What are a million Chinese in your life? But one guy dies down the block, just a neighbor, somebody you say hello to in passing, and you feel bad about it.

The Man at the bar shooting off his big mouth is a stranger, a no-good punk who deserves to burn, maybe worse. That's all you gotta know. That's all you wanna know. Just look at him and work up a hate. See how he whispers in the blonde's ear. Listen to her laughing. That louse is making a bum out of a respectable girl. Dousing him with acid will be like pushing him into a swimming pool, one quick move and it's done.

The waiter went by. Self-consciously, Joey bit into his sandwich and chewed, almost gagging because of lack of saliva. He sipped on the Coke and the food went down like lead. He pushed the rest of the sandwich aside. Waiter or not, he just couldn't go any food.

Abruptly, he decided to go outside for some air. This

place smells like a sewer, he thought angrily, a damn dirty sewer. The cramps seized him suddenly, powerfully. He dropped two dollars on the table and hurried into the men's room.

Benny Cantor, sitting in the black Buick parked near the corner, shifted his body but couldn't find a comfortable spot. At the moment he would have gladly given a five-hundred-dollar donation to any charity, including the Moslem, if he could be somewhere else.

Why the hell had Augie picked on him? His own damned brother-in-law! And if everything went smoothly on this job, what kind of work would dear Augie find for him next? It figured. Never till today had Augie sent him on such a stinking assignment. Beating up a guy, yes, but acid! So, Augie, brother, pal, what comes after I'm a big success on this job?

With a hundred cheap punks in the organization, why pick his own right-hand man? Well, one of his right-hand men.

In his heart, Benny knew that if and when Verde moved up in the organization, one of the others, not Benny, would move up with his brother-in-law. For Benny Cantor didn't quite have the degree of toughness, the conscienceless temperament necessary to take over a bigger job. Benny had never killed a man. Personally, he'd never even broken a man's legs or shivved a guy. Supervised, watched, yes, but never had there been physical contact between Benny and the victim. Benny Cantor wasn't the type. He knew it, Verde knew it. Sometimes in a mellow mood, Benny wondered why Verde kept him on the payroll, for there were stronger, tougher boys in the mob who would have gladly taken Benny's place on the payroll.

Once, after Benny had talked Verde out of doing a nasty job, the Boss had said, "Benny, you got a lot of punk in you. By all odds you should be pimping up in Harlem. But you got two things in your favor. One, I like your coniving brains; once in a while you give me a good idea. You know the second."

Benny knew. Rose Verde was his sister and Augie had a reputation for giving relatives a helping hand.

"When relatives stab you in the back, at least you know it ain't a stranger," Augie always said.

So long as Verde lived, and so long as Verde was in the mood, Benny Cantor had his job. If Verde died, naturally or otherwise . . . Benny shuddered. He'd be out in the cold, cold rain or, very possibly, on a cold, cold slab.

A patrol car drew up alongside the Buick and an authoritative voice said, "You parking there all night, mister?"

Benny stiffened. "The lady will be down any minute."

A patrolman got out of the car, pulled off his glove. "You're here over half an hour."

Benny started the car. "I'll move on—"

"Hold it, bud." The patrolman looked into the back of the car. "Let's see the license."

Benny thought: It's my luck, this is the moment Joey'll dump the acid and come running.

Eyes bulging like marbles, face putty-colored, Benny fumbled in his pocket and pulled out a wallet which he handed to the patrolman. It began to drizzle and the patrolman looked up at the sky and swore. Benny squirmed, glanced through the rear window. There was no sign of Joey. Somewhere across the street from the bar, Matt Green was standing in the shadows waiting to give Joey a hand if anything went wrong. If things went smoothly, Green would simply turn on his heel and walk out of the neighborhood.

The patrolman said, "Sam Lippe."

Staring straight ahead, Benny was thankful Verde was an efficient, experienced and meticulous planner. This was a good example of where careful planning paid dividends: Matt Green stealing a car, just in case things got screwed up and the car had to be abandoned: Howie Justin supplying the plates and the matching registration, ownership and license papers. Augie never took unnecessary chances. The only bad feature: Now the patrolman had seen both Benny and his picture and might be able to pick him out if Benny got picked up on suspicion. But this was one of the chances a guy had to take on a job.

The patrolman returned the wallet. "When I come around again, I want this corner vacant."

"Sure, Officer. I'll be out of here in a couple minutes."

The patrol car pulled silently away and Benny's breath came out in a long sigh. Lousy Cossack! Take a good look next time. How you gonna find me? I got no record, no

pictures downtown. Where you gonna look—Number One, New York?

He stuck his head out the window and looked back. Somebody wearing a soft felt hat pulled low over his eyes stood on the sidewalk in front of the bar. He took a step into the shadows but Benny had seen enough. It was Joey. Soon McNimmo would be coming out.

Make it fast, McNimmo! You gotta get it, so why wait? Lousy cops. C'mon, Joey, c'mon. Before those cops come back and I get chased. If I'm not here, where'll you run?

The rain was a fine drizzle. The street was gray, wet, desolate. Benny chewed on his fingernails and the minutes passed but nobody came out of the bar.

And then things happened so suddenly they took Benny's breath away. First a girl, then a man, stepped into the square of light on the sidewalk. Behind the man the shadows split, one part moving into the light to become Joey. Benny couldn't hear what Joey said but the man turned as if to answer. Joey's hand came up, the vial flashing in the light. Every feature twisted in a terror, the man's arms came up to block his face. Joey's hand jerked. The man's face seemed to fall to pieces as he staggered back.

The woman yelled, a hoarse broken scream that shattered the tense and waiting quiet. Before Joey could get away, the man reached for him with both hands. Joey hooked his left hand into the man's belly, thundered home a big right fist. The man went down, first his legs, then the rest of him.

Joey turned and raced for the car, his open coat tailing behind him, a long silhouette in the mist. The woman didn't stop screaming. Benny felt sick. The bitch would bring the cops. If that patrol car was still in the vicinity . . . As the nausea came up from his stomach in waves, he grasped the wheel tightly, started the motor. *C'mon, Joey, c'mon.* Now he could see Joey's face, wet with rain and sweat, triumphant. Benny threw open the car door. Joey dived in as the car pulled away from the curb, turned the corner, the wheels skidding dangerously.

Joey slammed the door. "Take it easy," he said. "You'll get us a ticket."

There was admiration in Benny's eyes. "You're okay,

Joey. That acid must've got all over his neck and face, but, man, it don't bother you nohow."

Joey wiped his face with a pocket handkerchief. "I don't know, Benny. I got most of the stuff on his clothes."

"A couple drops on his face, how much you need?"

"I just threw the stuff. I didn't have time to figure out where it hit."

Benny chuckled. "Man, you're cool, and the Boss is gonna get a bang out of this. If you blinded that guy, I wouldn't be a bit surprised."

Joey cried, "Why don't you hole up?"

Benny slipped a cigar between his lips, pulling off the cellophane wrapper with his teeth. "What time is it, Joey?"

"Five to two."

He glanced into the rear-view mirror. "I gotta make a phone call, then we'll get rid of this car." He looked at Joey's hands. "Don't take your gloves off while I'm making the call to the Boss. We're clean, let's stay that way."

Joey leaned back on the cool seat cover, eyes closed.

Benny said, "We'll get a bonus. A couple hundred sure."

Joey thought, *For what, dumping water into a guy's face?*

Back there in the bar washroom he'd dumped the acid into the sink, refilled the vial with tap water. It was the only way to relieve his stomach of that intolerable pain.

Chapter 23

The following evening, Joey and Benny waited in the anteroom for Verde to call them.

Benny was worried. "I don't like the way he sounded on that phone, like he was mad about something. Joey, you sure you got the right guy?"

Joey shrugged. "If Matt pointed out the right guy, I got him. Hell, Benny, I got eyes."

Benny sighed. "Maybe you blinded the bastard and the Boss don't like it. Funny, not a word in the papers."

The office door opened and Verde, face dark as a thundercloud, filled the doorway. "All right," he said sharply. "Get in here. Benny, either light that damn cigar or throw it away. You want something to chew on, I got it."

Licking his lips, Benny dropped the cigar into a cuspidor and moved quickly into the office.

Joey said, "Boss, if you and Benny got something private to discuss, I don't mind waitin' out here."

Verde stared at Joey's punch-marked face; what he saw in the soft brown eyes troubled him in an obscure and indefinable way.

In a voice threaded with anger, Verde said, "Don't get funny with me, you punch-drunk bastard."

A tight smile on his face, Joey walked stiffly to Verde's office couch and sat down. Verde motioned his bodyguard outside and closed the door after him.

Benny, sitting in the straight chair, looked questioningly up at Verde.

The bald-headed man sat on his desk. "Okay, what happened last night?"

Benny and Joey exchanged glances. Benny said, "What happened? You know what happened."

Verde said, "I don't know. You boys did the job, that's what I was led to believe. Only I saw your man today; there's not a mark on him."

Benny gasped. "No mark? It couldn't be. I saw Joey—Joey, tell him."

Joey studied his nails. "What could a punch-drunk bastard tell the big Boss?"

Annoyed, Verde said, "Don't be so sensitive."

Benny said, "I seen Joey give it to him right in the kisser."

"How do you know?" Verde said, "You were half a block away."

"I tell you I seen it. Augie, I never lied to you in my life."

Verde grunted. "Okay, you saw Joey do it. Joey, what's your explanation?"

"I'm so punchy, I couldn't explain nothing."

Verde pointed his finger. "Keep it up and I'll dump you in a barrel of horse manure, so help me. You throw the acid on the guy?"

Joey shrugged. "When I see the guy's leaving, I go outside. The bottle's in my right hand. The guy comes out with this dame, the same guy Matt fingered for me. I says, 'Hey, mister!' He turns. I give it to him, every drop in the bottle. The broad screams and the guy tries to grab me so I gotta hook and cross him. That's all."

Verde said, "Then how come there's not a mark on him?"

"Maybe he's so tough he's immune to acid. I knew a guy wiped his ass with poison ivy—"

"Oh, shut up a minute, will you?" Verde took a turn around the room. "I can't figure it out."

Joey volunteered, "You know that rain was coming down heavy. Ask Benny. A guy could've drowned. Maybe it washed off the acid as fast as he got it."

Verde stared at Joey. "That's ridiculous."

Benny said quickly. "It rained buckets, Augie."

Verde shrugged in a gesture of disgust. "Have it your way."

Joey said, "The guy was bundled up, his coat around his ears. That and the damned rain."

Verde snapped. "You missed him completely, or else he's laughing at me. The guy said, 'You got kids going around throwing piss water at me?' I felt like a fool and I didn't like it. Not that the wise guy isn't gonna wish he'd got the acid instead of the present I got planned for him. Joey, what's got me nuts is trying to figure out what was in that bottle?"

Joey eyed him innocently. "What for would Matt Green gimme piss water?"

Verde lifted his hand threateningly. "Sometimes, Joey . . ."

Joey cried, "It's my fault?"

"I don't know what to figure."

Joey jumped up. "Gimme another bottle, a gallon, and I'll go after him and ram it down his throat." His forehead wrinkled. "Maybe that ain't a hot idea. He could recognize me on account of he and that dame were facing me. I don't think he could pick me out from my picture or in a lineup, but when he sees me come near him, he's gonna be on guard and he'll start hollering bloody murder—"

"Okay," Verde shouted. "I got the point soon as you opened your mouth. Beat it."

Joey said, "Wasn't he scared or something? Too scared to listen, I mean?"

Verde shook his head. "He doesn't scare easy."

Joey said, "I just thoughta something. Suppose the guy's clothes got ruined but being a wise guy he didn't want to let on to you—"

"Joey," Verde said, "you gonna get the hell outa here?"

Chapter 24

It was bitter cold in the full sweep of the wind as Duke limped diagonally across the gutter. He was tired, the weariness which had settled in his thighs sharpening into pain. Turning into Delancey Street, he pulled up his coat collar against the wind. Uncomfortable sweat formed under the leather hat band. He stopped near an open ash can chained snuggly to the iron lattice of a basement, crumpled the hat into a shapeless mass and dropped it into the can.

Now that the job was done and he had no use for a hat to hide his red hair, let some bum make use of it.

He turned into Orchard Street. Halfway up the block, the patrolman was testing a shop door, his flashlight flat against the window, filling the store with light. Duke crossed the street, his face hidden behind his coat lapels, hands deep in his pockets. His right hand closed around the switchblade knife and for a moment he was tempted not to throw it away.

Hell, he thought, wash off the blood and it's as good as new.

He remembered Benny's warning when he'd dropped him out of the car on East Broadway. "Ditch the knife. It's hot and you don't want it around."

On the corner, after a quick look around, Duke pushed the knife into the sewer where the mud would wipe off the blood and fingerprints. Given time, the knife would soon be just another piece of rusty junk.

He stopped in front of his stoop. The air whipped around him and his blood tingled. His wrist watch said 3:20. A

hi-fi record was playing somewhere and the music had an aching, intoxicating throb. After a quick glance up and down the block, he backed off for a start, ran and leaped for the perpendicular fire-escape ladder. The left hand clutched a rung, cold and damp. He hung there for a moment, dangling, then swung the other hand up to the next rung. Quickly he scampered up, the pain in his thigh forgotten.

The bedroom window was open six full inches. Joey liked it that way. He'd said it so often Duke had come to believe it. "Air will never hurt you. It'll give you a lotta extra years." Duke lifted the window, stepped into the bedroom, and gently closed the window, careful to leave it open a few inches. Duke stood stiff, listening to Joey's even breathing. Satisfied, he swiftly undressed down to his shorts. Slowly, pausing every time the door creaked, he went out to the kitchen in bare feet. The radium dial on the alarm clock glowed at 3:27. He tightened the fifteen-watt night lamp screwed loosely into the wall socket. From the refrigerator he took ham and made himself two sandwiches on white bread. The first sandwich went down quickly, the second at a more leisurely pace.

Funny, he thought, how I always get more hungry when I've had a little action.

About to loosen the bulb, he got an idea. A smile playing around his eyes, he took the alarm clock from the shelf, turned the hands back to two o'clock, carefully set the alarm to go off at 2:10. The light out, he slipped into his bedroom and set the clock on the dresser. In a few moments he'd crawled into bed. Joey stirred but did not awaken. Duke pulled the blanket up around his ears and waited, but when the alarm went off he almost jumped out of bed. He felt rather than saw Joey sit up.

Feigning sleepiness, Duke said, "Hey, Joey, what the hell."

Joey mumbled. "That somebody's telephone?"

"It's the alarm," Duke said. "I don't get it. I set it for eight o'clock, why's it ringing now?"

Joey crawled out of bed. "Shut your mouth," he said to the clock. "I'm comin', I'm comin'." He snapped the plunger. "Now go on and holler." Yawning, his words hardly distinguishable, he said, "What eight o'clock? Don't y' know

how to tell time? The point of the hand is supposed to face the number. You got it ass-ways."

"Jeez," Duke said. "I must be blind. Fix it, will ya, Joey. I gotta get up for school."

Without touching the alarm clock, Joey returned to bed.

Duke sat up, looked down at his brother. "I asked you to do me a favor and fix the alarm clock."

"For cryin' out loud," Joey cried, "don't crap me, Duke. Only this afternoon the truant officer was here. Twice I give you the absence cards they sent from school when you promised you'd go back. The truant officer said you ain't been back."

Duke chuckled. "Okay, so I told a little lie. Truth is, I was figuring on getting a job tomorrow."

Joey said, "No more school?"

"For a while, Joey. I'm not hitting it right with these teachers. Next term . . ."

"There ain't gonna be a next term," Joey said bitterly. "Why, Duke?"

"I said next term I'm going back," he said sharply. "Let's not scrap about it. We got a deal working. You don't butt into my business and I won't ask how you're doing in Verde's mob. I like it that way."

Later, after Joey had fallen asleep, Duke got out of bed and corrected the time. From his trouser pocket he took out ten twenty-dollar bills and stuffed the two hundred dollars into a shoe box. Back in bed, he lay awake for a long time wondering if the job he'd done tonight was for Benny personally, as Benny tried to make him believe, or for the big guy, Verde.

Either way it didn't matter because Benny had promised him that from now on Duke Koslo was on the payroll.

The next morning Joey awoke with a start. He sat up in bed the better to see the alarm clock. It was 8:30. He jabbed an elbow into Duke's ribs. Cursing, Duke turned, looked up into Joey's somber eyes.

Duke said, "I dreamt somebody shoved a hot poker in my ribs."

"It's eight-thirty."

"So it's eight-thirty. You woke me up to tell me that? Oh!" He remembered and smiled. "I was supposed to get up at eight."

"And look for a job or something."

He gave Joey a quick look. "Don't you believe a guy? Well, it's too late now. All the jobs will be grabbed by the time I get there."

Joey got out of bed, reached for his trousers on the chair. "It's a shame killing a term. You would've graduated in June and I could've sent you to a good engineering school . . ."

Duke's loud snoring sent him out of the bedroom in disgust.

Mom was just coming into the apartment, her hands full of groceries, a folded newspaper sticking out of a bag.

Joey helped her with the bundles. "You look like it's cold out."

"A body could freeze to death."

"How many times I told you I can shop for you? Cold don't bother me, I'm too tough."

Chewing on a roll, he pulled the tabloid out of the bag, flipped it open on the table. One headline and a photograph took up the entire first page:

UNION ORGANIZER SLASHED

The picture showed a man seated in a chair, a large white patch of gauze or towel stained black on his face, a policeman and a bartender to one side, a hospital attendant leaning over a medical supply bag. His face was distorted with pain but Joey knew this was The Man.

Suddenly a horrible suspicion entered his mind. Mouth drawn into a thin line of suspense, Joey turned, as directed, to Page 5. The man, he learned, was Peter J. McNimmo, a union organizer for the A.F. of L. McNimmo's face had been cut from ear to ear by a hoodlum in the washroom of a 65th Street bar and grill. The hoodlum had then shoved McNimmo into a toilet cubicle and, calmly walking past a man entering the washroom, had escaped.

McNimmo described his assailant as around six feet tall, lankily built, wearing a gray coat and a brown felt hat. The witness—the man entering the washroom—insisted he was stockily built and had worn a brown coat and a gray hat pulled down over his venomous eyes.

Joey thought: Duke never owned a hat in his life. Besides, Duke's eyes are laughing all the time, not venomous.

McNimmo had said, "I'll never forget that face. I'd know it if I saw it again. I've got a good idea who ordered this

done but without proof I'll say nothing at this time. I just want those gangsters to know they can't intimidate me. I will continue to carry on my legal duties for the A.F. of L."

When, Joey cried to himself, when did it happen?

He started at the top of the column, read slowly. "Peter J. McNimmo, union organizer for the A.F. of L., was slashed at two o'clock this morning . . ."

Jubilant, Joey cried, "That's it."

Mom was at his side. "Anything wrong?"

He laughed. "Nothing's wrong. I'm just nuts, Mom, just plain nuts."

Chapter 25

A Christmas-wrapped box of stockings under his arm, Joey knocked on Tina's apartment door and, as if this were his first date, nervously licked his lips and straightened his shoulders. The door opened and Tina's mother stood big and fat in the doorway, the welcoming look in her eyes gone suddenly cold.

"Tina is not home." The full mouth twisted contemptuously. "As far as you're concerned, she'll never be home."

He tried to smile, failed. "I just wanted to leave her a Christmas present, for old times."

A neighbor opened her door, looked out. Tina's mother pulled her head back into her apartment.

"Go away," she said. "Stop bothering us. Tina's a respectable girl."

She tried to close the door but a streak of stubbornness made him thrust his foot between the door and jamb. "I said I had a present."

"I don't want to talk to you in the hall."

He pushed the door open and stepped inside. "Then talk to me in here. Then nobody'll report you to the police for consorting with criminals."

She turned her back on him, went to the table and picked up an apple. "I just don't want you here." She took half

the apple in one bite, chewed savagely, the flesh on her face and neck quivering. "Tina has a nice feller now and I don't want you spoiling it for her."

He stared at the bare Christmas tree, four feet high, on the kitchen table. "I'm Tina's feller," he said, standing relaxed and at ease. "She belongs to me, nobody else."

She backed away, frightened. "You start something, Joey Koslo, and I'll go to the police." She took a last bite, flung the apple core into the sink. "I'm warning you. Tina's got a feller, Mel Pollen."

"She don't love him."

"He's buying her a ring, a real one."

"She don't love him."

"If Mel's buying her a ring, she loves him." She picked up another apple. "All I ask of you is to let them alone. Mel finishes pharmacy school in January. His father is setting him up in a drugstore in the Bronx. Joey, I can't say I'm sorry for you because I'm not, but you can see how things are."

His head throbbed and there was a sickness inside him. "She still work at the Settlement?"

"Yes." Her eyes were troubled. "Joey, please don't make trouble. For Tina's sake. You want her to be happy, don't you?"

Without answering, he went out of the apartment and walked aimlessly through the dark streets. When he looked up, he was standing in front of the Settlement House, staring down at the box of stockings in his hands, wondering why he hadn't dropped it on the table beside the tree in Tina's home.

He froze in his tracks when Mr. Forrester's voice said from behind him. "It's cold out here, Joey. Come inside."

He looked at the big man with the smoking pipe. "I don't feel like going in."

Forrester looked disappointed. "I was hoping you came to say hello to me. But your boss wouldn't like it if he found out."

"I just got nothing to talk to you about. That's simple to understand, ain't it?"

Forrester's gray eyes studied Joey's face. "I guess so. I was just hoping you wanted to get something off your chest. Once, when you worked for me . . ."

"I don't work for you now, so forget it."

Quietly, Forrester said, "We're on opposite sides of the fence, aren't we, Joey?"

Joey watched a boy racing down the street on roller skates narrowly miss a car crossing the intersection. The car stopped short, the driver sticking his head out the window to shout obscenities at the boy.

Forrester said, "I had confidence in you, Joey. You were going to help those kids, your friends, Duke's. You were going to save them."

His lips parting bitterly, Joey said, "I couldn't even save myself. How was I gonna save those kids?"

"We could still do it, Joey."

"Talk is cheap, my life ain't. If you think I'm gonna commit suicide just to save a couple of punk kids, you're crazy."

Forrester knocked the bowl of his pipe against his palm. "Your brother is one of those punk kids."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't I, Joey? Duke is one of the mob, isn't he? The Koslo brothers are now working for Verde. You got him into the mob, instead of helping him."

"I tried. I tried to keep him clean." There was perplexity in his voice. "Somewhere . . . I lost him . . . he wouldn't listen."

"Now he's a gangster, heart and soul."

Joey flared up. "He ain't a gangster. A pissy kid running errands."

"What kind of errands?"

"For cryin' out loud, you ever go to school? You don't know what errands is?"

Forrester said, "Duke carries contraband from seller to buyer, from wholesaler to retailer, from seaman to racketeer."

Joey flung his head up. "Maybe you understand that lingo. I don't."

Forrester's large nostrils quivered. "You understand, all right. Don't think the police don't know what's going on. They're just waiting to grab these kids, Duke and his helpers. I suppose you didn't know Duke is a boss himself, that the Orchard gang is now working for Duke Koslo at so much an errand?"

"You said enough," Joey cried. "Leave me alone."

"I intend to," Forrester said. "I've gotten to the point where I'm beyond worrying about you or your brother."

"Then what the hell do you want?"

Forrester was obviously fighting to control his temper. "Your brother will corrupt every kid in the neighborhood if he's given enough time. Those kids are the ones I'm worrying about. Between him and Verde—"

"You don't like Duke; you never did. You can't poison my mind against my brother."

Forrester shook his head sadly. "I'm not trying to poison your mind. I want you to stop Duke before the police do it for you. Last week a seaman was seen giving a package to one of the Orchard boys, that fellow Pinto. He got away before the police could close in on him. When they caught up to him the package was gone and there was no evidence. Sooner or later a police net will be thrown around Duke and he'll go to prison."

"Get away from me," Joey cried, his entire body shaking. "Before I slug you, get out of my sight."

Forrester wasn't frightened. "All right, Joey. I said what I had to. I'm happy you didn't come down those steps with me. I don't want you in the House." He walked down a few stairs and turned. "Unless you need help. That's my job."

You stand there for a long time after Mr. Forrester disappears into the Settlement House and you got a new pain inside. After a while, the box of stockings still under your arm, you walk to the adjoining building and sit down on the stoop. The stone is cold despite your coat, and the chill runs through you but you just sit there. You rest your face against a pulsing wrist and you want to cry, you're so full of tears.

You don't lift your head when you hear voices, a familiar one that makes your blood race like crazy and a male voice, Mel's, that sounds soft and refined like a schoolteacher's. You force yourself to look around. It's Tina, eyes shining and an expression of complete bliss on the warm wide mouth, and Mel in a pork-pie hat and velvet-collar overcoat. You can't see Mel's face on account of the shadows, you don't know if he's a good guy or bad, you know noth-

ing about him except that you never hated anybody so much in your life.

Tina's laughing softly and they're holding hands and you want to beat the guy's brains out, kick him and stomp him until there's nothing left.

The guy takes Tina's arm like he owns her and they go past you like you're dirt. Tina, I love you! And she loves you. Go on, stand up and ask her, Joey. The hell with his fancy words, he can't outtalk two fists.

You pull your head in. Ask her, Joey! Run after them, say, "Tina, it's me, Joey. You love me. Tell me, Tina . . ." But you can't move. You're afraid she's liable to tell you off and if she did you'd sink right through the ground.

They're past you now, their voices low and soft as if afraid a loud sound would shatter the spell of the evening. She was yours, Joey, body and soul, to take or discard . . . and you discarded her.

You stand up on rubber legs. It's the last round and you're through, washed up. You look down at the box in your hands and all of a sudden you kick it out into the gutter. When a truck runs over it you feel a crazy kind of satisfaction.

As Tina went down the street she had a peculiar feeling, as if her movements were being observed. She glanced around but there was no one in sight except that figure crouched on the cold stone stoop like a drunk. Somehow that person, whoever it was, reminded her of Joey.

Joey, what are you doing tonight? Have you another girl? Are you happy? Do you still smile with your eyes like you used to?

Mel said, "You lost your tongue, Tina?"

"I'm sorry. What were you saying?"

They turned the corner into the wind, and a sheet of dirty newspaper sailed over their heads.

Mel squeezed her arm. "Would you like to go for a walk on the bridge?"

Joey used to love to walk with her, block after block, mile after mile. Once they'd walked to Forty-second Street and back.

"No," she said. "It's too cold. I'll buy you a cup of coffee in my house."

His grin vanished. "I'd rather not. Your mother and

father's constant arguments drive me crazy. I'm sorry, I didn't mean it that way. It's just that I've got no stomach for people snarling at each other like . . . like . . . ”

“Animals,” she snapped. “It's your favorite word.”

He shrugged. “Let's not argue. I'm not marrying your parents, I'm marrying you.”

“I love Momma and Poppa and—”

Mel shook his head emphatically. “But you mustn't expect me to love them. I'm sorry, Tina, they're just not my sort.”

“They come from the wrong side of the bus line, don't they? I didn't ask you to love them. Just don't look down on them. They're nice people, really they are. I'm not trying to make excuses for them. They are what they are and that's all there is to it. You'll just have to get used to their ways.”

He sighed. “It won't be easy. People just don't swear at each other where I come from. My Mom and Dad . . .”

Have you a new girl, Joey? I hope you find somebody nice, that's what I wish for you, Joey, for old times' sake. . . . She had a peculiar ache in her throat and she knew her wish was a lie.

Mel was saying, “Every time I listen to your folks argue, I get a sick feeling inside.” He laughed shortly. “They'll soon have me believing marriage isn't all it's cracked up to be.”

A new gleam appeared in her eyes. “Like mother, like daughter.”

“Oh, I didn't mean that.”

“It could be. Mel, let's go up to my house, just for a while. Please?”

He sighed. “For a little while.”

Chapter 26

Joey watched Tina and Mel turn the corner, then, head buried behind his lapels, hands deep in his coat pockets, he hurried to Pedro Gonzales' house on Cherry Street. He felt an ache to tear into somebody. With all his heart he wished

a couple of hoodlums would try to mug him in this narrow, depressing street of shabby buildings and dirty gutters. Then he could lash out and no matter how much of a beating he took, he wouldn't mind it, not as long as he could pound somebody around and dispel this depression that possessed him.

Pedro's buxom wife Felice opened the door for Joey. She looked even fatter, her breasts bigger and flabbier and more exposed. But there was a haunted look in her eyes, a wariness that disappeared in a sigh of relief as she recognized Joey.

"You want Pedro?" she smiled.

"I want Pedro."

"Him in bathroom."

Joey looked around the room. There was more furniture in the Gonzales apartment since Joey and Benny had been there four months ago. There was a new divan and club chair, a new kitchen set, modernistic and ugly yellow in color. The place was still badly in need of a painting.

"You're living," Joey said to Mrs. Gonzales. "It's your America."

She smiled and said something in Spanish he didn't understand.

Pedro Gonzales came in tightening his belt. "Hola," he said, immediately recognizing Joey. "How you, amigo?"

His face still gaunt, Pedro seemed more relaxed, if the smile on this thin lips said anything. Joey looked him up and down slowly, deliberately.

"Last time," Joey cried, "you looked like you were dead but too lazy to lay down. I hadda throw you a couple bucks to bail you out. Now you look like you could run me a benefit. Where the kids, out riding in the Cadillac?"

Pedro frowned, puzzled. "Children sleep. You angry, amigo. Why?"

Joey looked away. "It's the damn cold weather. It freezes a guy's guts."

"You have drink, maybe?"

"How's our friend Benny? Your amigo, mine, everybody's amigo." He looked around again. "I see where you must've done him those favors he's been asking for."

Pedro sucked on his upper lip, smiled. "Benny, he was good man. Him get Pedro plenty work."

"I'll bet you saw the whole world since I saw you last. How many places you been to in four months?"

Gonzales chuckled. "Montreal, Havana, Buenos Aires."

"Last night," Mrs. Gonzales volunteered, "Pedro come home from Sicily."

Joey said, "That's four favors in four months for Benny."

Pedro said, "I help Benny, him help Pedro."

"That's the ticket," Joey said heartily. "What did you bring home last night from Sicily?"

Gonzales was perturbed. "You sure mad guy."

"I asked you a question." He saw the sudden alertness in Pedro's eyes. "That damn cold," he said. "You gotta holler just to keep warm. What you import this time, Pedro?"

"*Nada*," Pedro said. "Nothing. How my friend Benny? You see him?"

"All the time."

"Then why you don't ask him these questions?"

"Just checking, Pedro, to see if you're up on your toes. You think I'm not in the know? I'll just mention the secret code: watch works—diamonds—narcotics. You've become a great importer since I saw you last."

Pedro's face was blank, immobile. Mrs. Gonzales chewed on her tongue, her eyes wide with fright.

Joey said, "What you bring last night, Pedro?"

"I bring nothing."

"Maybe this time you were in the exporting business. You boys ever take cars or gold out of the country?"

All sign of friendliness gone, Pedro cried, "I don't talk to you. I talk to Benny."

"Who you think sent me?"

Sunken eyes squinted. "He don't send you; him send boy."

"What am I, an old man?"

Pedro clasped his hands together. "*Señor*, I do you no harm. What you want?"

The knock on the door sounded loud. Everybody froze.

Joey said, "Aren't you gonna open up, Pedro?"

"Go away," Pedro shouted at the door. "I don't need nothing."

Quickly Joey moved to the door, opened it, stepped back. It was quiet for a second, then Duke's voice said, "What goes, Pedro?" He looked around the door. They stared at

each other for a few moments, then Duke said, "What you doing here, Joey?"

Joey said, "You answer first."

Pedro's dark eyes moved from Duke to Joey and back again. "You both go away. I don't talk to you. Tomorrow I see Benny."

Duke stuffed his hands deep in his Mackinaw pockets. "Joey bother you, Pedro?"

Joey said, "I was just telling Pedro we're one big happy family—you, me, Benny. C'mon, Duke, don't look like that. You think I don't know what's cookin'? Pedro, give Duke the package he came for."

Pedro cried, "I no talk to you, you crazy man."

Mrs. Gonzales stood flat against the wall. "Go away, please," she moaned.

Duke's lips barely moved as he spoke. "You got no business here, Joey."

"Once and for all," Joey cried, "you're getting out of the rackets and staying out."

Duke's face flushed. "I got me a break. For the first time in my life, Peg-leg Duke Koslo's got a chance to be somebody. You, Joey, ain't gonna stop me."

"Whatever Pedro imported last night, I'll take it wherever it has to go."

"The Boss is gonna holler plenty."

"I don't care, not any more. I've had it up to here."

"They'll kill you, Joey, you know that."

"I got so much pain inside me, I don't care a helluva lot if I live or die. But I do care what happens to you. Not just because you're my brother . . . it's Mom, Duke, her whole life is you. In her eyes I'm just a boarder in the house, but you, Duke, you're her son. You're jamming yourself up so bad you'll never get out of it. You'll wind up a bum, an ex-con, like me, and that would kill Mom."

Duke's smile was thin and forced. "I'm in the racket now, Joey, up to my neck."

"There's still time."

"The clock stopped, Joey. I stopped it because that's how I want it."

"You're only a kid. You know what's in those packages you collect and deliver?"

Duke reeked with smugness. "You kidding?"

Joey turned to Pedro. "Gimme the damn package."

Pedro looked at Duke, a plea for help in his eyes.

Joey cried, "You don't give it to me, I'll rip this house apart and find it myself."

Duke said, "Don't blow your top, Joey."

Fiercely, Joey said, "I'm delivering this package; then I'm gonna have a long talk with the Boss; one of us has got to get out of this business."

Duke laughed. "A hole in the ground, that's what the odd guy gets."

Joey cried, "Pedro, I'll rip the whole house apart, so help me."

A smile playing around his lips, Duke leaned against the wall. "What's it gonna get you, Joey?"

Joey upended the club chair, ripped the black muslin material nailed to the four corners. "If this is what you want, Pedro."

Shaking with fear, Mrs. Gonzales clung to Pedro. "*Por favor,*" she repeated over and over.

Duke said, "Don't worry, Pedro. Benny makes good anything this crazy guy damages. Go on, Joey, break all the furniture. You'll find nothing because there's nothing here. Can you understand that, you hot-headed nut? Nothing, Joey. Rip the furniture, tear down the walls, you'll find nothing."

"I'm gonna make sure," Joey said.

He kicked open the bedroom door. A boy cried out. A girl began to whimper. In the semidarkness Joey could see the children, Maria and Thomas, arms around each other, eyes wide. As Joey stared, the anger drained out of him and the tenseness left his muscles. He felt limp and weak.

"Go to sleep," he said to the children. "Mrs. Gonzales, why the hell don't you go inside and put your kids to sleep? You know what time it is?"

On silent feet Mrs. Gonzales went into the bedroom and closed the door.

Joey said, "You're a lucky guy, Pedro. Duke, I'm asking you."

"So long, Joey. I'll be home early. We can talk. I'm off my time schedule now. Don't make it worse."

Joey turned abruptly and, pulling open the door, stalked out of the house. Layers of gray cloud obscured the sky,

and even as he reached the corner a flurry of snow came down like a broken, twisting white veil. He crossed the street, coat open, oblivious to the cold. From behind a car, he fixed his eyes on the Gonzales tenement building and waited. Minutes passed slowly and just when Joey had decided Duke had gone out through the back yard, he saw the red head, the wide shoulders in the Mackinaw, the limp.

On noiseless feet Joey caught up with Duke at the corner. "You mind if I walk a bit with you, Duke?"

The youth stared, nonplussed. "For cryin' . . . You crazy or somethin', Joey? What you want with my life?"

"The package." His fists clenched. "So help me, I don't get it, I'm takin' it off you."

"What package you talking about?"

"I could frisk you. If I'm wrong, I'll buy you the biggest steak in town. If I'm right, you go home and I'll deliver it."

Duke took a half-step back. "Go away, Joey."

"I'm takin' it, Duke."

They glared at each other as they circled warily.

Joey said, "Never in my life did I lay a hand on you but it looks like I got no choice this time. I talk to you nice, on my knees I ask you to do what's right, but you got your own damn big ideas. I got nothing left to work on you, no more words, no nothing, except two fists. Maybe that's what you need. Maybe it's the only language you can understand."

They stalked each other around a litter can, around a lamppost, eyes wide, mouths wide open.

Duke was breathing hard. "You and me, Joey, we are part of the mob, we always will be, till we die."

"No," Joey shouted. "You're not in this yet. I won't let you."

"You're drawing a crowd."

"When it gets big enough, there'll be cops. Would you rather give it to them?"

He lunged, missed Duke with both hands. Duke moved around a pile of garbage, came up on the sidewalk. Joey stepped in quickly, grabbed Duke's arm, began to bend it back.

"The cops, Duke," he cried, "any minute they'll be here. They'll be sure to frisk us."

Duke twisted suddenly, brought his knee up. Joey's grip

broke as he clutched his groin, sinking to his knees. Nausea hit him in the throat as he began to retch and gag.

"I'm sorry," Duke cried. "Honest to God . . ."

Joey forced himself up. "The goddam package . . ."

Duke turned and ran, Joey staggering drunkenly after him. People scattered out of their way. The siren's wail sounded loud and piercing in the still night air. Joey called out a warning to Duke but, head down, the youth ran blindly up the street. The patrol car raced alongside him. A patrolman's head came out of the window calling out an order. Duke continued to run, slipping, straightening, covering distance despite his bad leg.

The patrol car picked up speed, mounted the sidewalk to cut him off. Duke slammed into the car, bounced off, turned to run. The patrolman was out of the car, his revolver in his fist.

He said coolly, "See if you can outrun a bullet."

Duke flattened himself against the wall, his face distorted with frustration and helplessness.

With horrified fascination, Joey, half a block away, watched the patrolman order Duke to face the tenement and place his hands flat against the wall. The second patrolman, a sergeant, came around to slap his hands over Duke's body. The sergeant paused, slipped his hand into the Mac-kinaw and when it came out it held a package which appeared about three inches square from where Joey stood.

The patrolman spoke to Duke, holding up the package. Duke shrugged. The patrolman motioned with his gun, and Duke went into the patrol car.

Joey shook his head helplessly. This was his fault. He'd turned his brother in. Joey Koslo blowing the whistle on his own brother! The grief exploded in his heart and the tears came.

Chapter 27

Augie Verde carefully folded the typewritten sheets and slipped them into a long envelope. In his desk he found an airmail stamp.

"Here," he said to Benny Cantor. "Licking these lousy envelopes gives me indigestion."

Benny ran his tongue across the flap, smoothed it out on the desk. "It don't taste bad." He licked the stamp, pressed it on a corner of the envelope. "It's midnight, Augie. You should've been home hours ago."

Verde rubbed his tired eyes with his thumbs. "I did promise Rose I'd be home early. Though I ain't doing the Christmas tree till tomorrow night. Wonderful feeling this Christmas."

In his desk, waiting to be taken home the following night, were three packages. Two contained identical gold crosses on gold chains for Angelina and Rita. The other had a six-pointed Star of David, three carats in diamond chips distributed equally in the platinum base. Rose would like this. Tomorrow night after the tree was up, he'd drop the packages under it.

Laughing to himself, he got up from his desk chair. Funny, a Jewish Star of David under a Christmas tree, even if Christ was a Jew.

Benny held up his coat for Verde to slip each arm through the sleeves. The silk scarf around his neck, his pearl-gray felt firm on his head, Verde moved toward the door.

"Come out Christmas Day, Benny, and bring the folks."

Benny laughed. "Christmas Day yet! My old man sees a Christmas tree he turns green."

Verde eyed him sharply. "Pop ain't that bad, so stop exaggerating."

Benny shrugged. "He sees me, he turns green too. I'll make it for dinner. I'll let you know tomorrow about the folks."

Verde went through the large rooms toward the stairway. He stopped short at the sound of excited voices from the street.

Verde frowned. "Sounds like trouble. I've got to get home tonight."

Matt Green came up the stairs, Joey a step behind him. Green said, "I tried to send him home but he comes busting in like he owns the building."

Joey's face was dirt-smudged, his clothes disheveled. "I gotta see you, Augie."

"Can't it wait till morning?"

"It's Duke," Joey blurted out. "The cops grabbed him coming out of Gonzales' flat."

The silence was deafening.

Benny spoke first. "The spik brought in a package last night."

Wordlessly, Verde turned on his heel and returned to his office, Benny and Joey following, Matt Green stationing himself outside the closed door. Verde walked heavily to his chair and, still wearing his coat and hat, sat down.

Joey, frantic, clenched and unclenched his fists. "You gotta get him out, Augie. I don't want that kid brother in no prison."

Verde's hard green eyes were fixed on Joey's face. "How do you know what happened to Duke?"

Joey leaned over the desk. "I know because I was there. I got Duke in that jam, if you really want to know. I chased Duke to get the package away from him—he's got no damn business working with hot stuff—the patrol car came up on the sidewalk and Duke was a goner."

Verde cried, "You dumb sonofabitch."

"I can't argue with you."

Benny's cool unfriendly eyes stared blankly. "What the hell you buttin' in for?"

Fairly snarling, Joey turned on Benny. "I told you to lay off Duke. He's got no place in this mob. I was gonna deliver that package wherever the hell it was supposed to go. I didn't want Duke to get messed up in the racket. Benny, for cryin' out loud, I could kill you for giving Duke those damn jobs."

Verde said, "Benny, I thought I told you I didn't want Duke running those stinkin' errands any more. Haven't you

got enough kids for these jobs? I said give Duke something better—”

“No,” Joey cried, slapping the desk angrily. “Nothing for Duke.”

Verde came up out of his chair, pointed his finger at Joey. “You shut your mouth. Duke is in whether you like it or not. I like him and he’s part of the family. What the hell, Joey, you want Duke sprung or what?”

Joey took a deep breath. “Get him out. That’s all I want for now; get Duke out of prison.”

“Now or later,” Verde said, “Duke is one of the boys. I got plans for him.” He placed his hat on the desk and ran a quick hand over his shiny head. “You try to stop my plans, I got to get rid of you, Joey.” He turned his eyes on Benny. “You, you stupid bastard.”

Benny covered his ears with both hands. “It won’t happen again, Augie. This was an emergency.”

Verde leaned back in his chair. “It’s done, so why cry now. I’ll get the kid out, Joey, don’t worry about that. I got a good rep for taking care of my boys.”

“You’ll get him out on bail, then what?”

Verde held out both palms. “What the hell you want me to say? You think this is a five-buck ticket violation you want me to fix? These days you can’t even fix those. I’ll get Duke a mouthpiece, the best we got. Tomorrow the kid will be taken to Police Headquarters for pictures, prints and the lineup. When they’re finished looking him over, they’ll take him to Adolescent Court for arraignment. My mouthpiece will try to get a low bail fixed and we’ll spring him. That’s the first step. We’ll worry about the second when we get to it.”

Joey said, “You skipped one step in Duke’s travelogue, the questioning.”

Verde shrugged. “I can’t stop that, Joey; nobody can, not when the cops got the goods on Duke. Anyway, I got confidence in that kid. He’s been under the lights before; he can make up a story of how he was running an errand for a strange man for five bucks to deliver the package to another strange man he was supposed to meet in some alley. The cops won’t buy it but as long as he’s got a story to hold onto, they won’t break him. Duke will be out and home for Christmas Eve.”

Joey wasn’t satisfied. “They could fix a big bail.”

Verde cried, "A lot you know about it. The D.A. can holler his brains out for fifty-grand bail, but tomorrow is the day before Christmas and the boy is eighteen and the judge sitting in Adolescent Court has a soft spot in his heart for eighteen-year-old offenders who are arraigned the day before Christmas. Anyway, whatever the bail, Hymie the bondsman will get Duke out." He got up and came around his desk, to slip an arm around Joey's shoulder. "Tell Mom Duke is staying with friends tonight. Keep the newpapers out of her reach." He steered Joey to the door. "Don't worry . . ."

After he'd closed the door, Verde returned to his seat. His forehead wrinkled in deep concentration, he said nothing for a few minutes. Finally, his forehead smoothed out. "Benny," he said, "I'm trying to make my mind up: Do we let Duke go to trial or can't we afford to take the chance? If he opens his mouth, he can give me real trouble."

Benny licked his lips. "Not Duke, Augie. He don't talk. Remember those guns he and Matt swiped from the warehouse?"

Verde said, "That time the kid knew the cops were only guessing, so he could bluff 'em and beat 'em. Now they got the stuff on him; bluffing will get nothing but a couple slaps on the mouth. If he opens up, the federal government will move in and fast. Can we afford that?"

Benny wiped his face with a pocket handkerchief. "No, not if it's like you say."

Verde watched Benny take a cigar out of his pocket and rip off the Cellophane with quick, nervous fingers. "It'd be safer for you if you got rid of Duke. It's your life I'm talking about, Benny."

Benny bit through the cigar. "My life?"

"You stupid?" Verde said. "Duke can't pin anything on me. You're the one he can tell stories about. Once he fingers you, I got a headache, dear brother-in-law, because you know too much about me and I can't take a chance that you might have a lot of yellow running up your back."

Benny's voice was a croaking, agonizing whisper. "You don't trust me?"

Verde grinned wryly. "I wouldn't trust anybody when it comes to my hide. I'd have to protect myself. Rose would cry a little for her brother, she'd say a prayer for him

every year or so, but she'd get over it a lot faster than if I were the one. Right?"

Benny hung his head. "That's all you think of me, a stoolie for the cops."

Verde laughed and got up. "You're okay, Benny. Let's not worry about it for a couple days anyway—unless Duke's already spilled his guts. Then when we get him out tomorrow, we'll do a fast job." He picked up his hat, replaced it carefully on his head. "If I've gotta give you a Christmas present, Benny, I hope it's what I bought."

Chapter 28

Joey waited all afternoon for Duke to come home but when at six o'clock his brother still hadn't shown up, he began to decorate the Christmas tree. Though he lacked the patience and proper mood to work on the tree, Joey felt he had to make a show for Mom's sake. As far as he could tell, he had been successful in keeping the bad news from her.

The morning papers had carried a four-paragraph story on the arrest of a John Doe for possessing twelve ounces of pure heroin from which could be made pounds of the narcotic drug, depending on the scruples of the manufacturer. The afternoon papers, supplied with information by the detectives in the Seventh Precinct, had mentioned Duke's name under a Page 3 picture of Duke snarling at a photographer. Joey had seen to it that no newspaper came into the flat.

Joey climbed the stepladder and Mom handed him a box of tinsel. He felt a pang; Mom looked as exhausted as if she'd lived to a hundred and ten and was too tired to go on. There was a funny glazed look in her eyes as if they were covered with a film, and her lips were closed so tight they were bloodless. Every once in a while she looked at the door.

The tree was half-decorated when Duke came home at

eight o'clock. Mom's head lifted, some of the tiredness drained out of her.

"You all right, Duke?"

He grinned. "Why shouldn't I be?" He kissed her cheek. "I could use a sandwich."

"Of course. Take your coat off."

Duke stared at her as she went into the kitchen. Though her manner had held no rebuke, he felt somehow on the defensive. He looked at Joey, who shrugged.

"She don't know nothin'."

"She sure acted funny."

"You didn't just get out?"

"I had business with a broad. You sure got your guts even talking to me. You're responsible for this damned mess."

Joey draped tinsel over a branch. "If it wasn't yesterday it'd been some other day. Sooner or later you hadda get grabbed."

"Maybe. I oughta bounce a chair off your head."

Joey said, "Shut up, Mom'll hear you. Gimme a hand with this tree."

"Tree?" Duke cried. "My whole life's in hock and you're worried about a tree?"

"I wish it was me, so help me God."

Conversation died as Mom carried in a cheese sandwich and a glass of milk.

Duke bit into the sandwich, rolled the food around his mouth. Blue eyes twinkled. "Mom, this is the best sandwich you ever made."

Sitting in her chair, she stared at a point beyond his head. He could see the tenseness in her bearing, the pain reflected in her eyes.

He cleared his throat. "If you're sore because I didn't come home last night, one of the guys asked me to sleep over. Pinto's like a kid, his folks were going out and he was scared to sleep alone. Can you imagine, Mom, a big kid like that?"

Her mouth quivered. "You didn't sleep in no friend's house." The tears came quickly, flooding her eyes. "Oh, Duke, what's going to become of you now?"

Duke pushed the rest of his sandwich aside, looked up at Joey, frozen into immobility on the stepladder.

Joey cried, "Those damned neighbors, they couldn't miss the chance to tell her."

Mom said fiercely, "Nobody told me. I saw the papers. I can read."

The knock on the door was sharp, staccato, and without waiting for a reply, Detective Lieutenant Kale pushed it open and came into the apartment. Tagging a few steps behind him was his partner, Jackson, chewing a wad of gum.

Kale's eyes glanced over the tree. "Merry Christmas."

Joey went up a step to drape more tinsel. "You guys can take off your coats and gimme a hand."

Duke spat the words. "They touch that tree, I'll burn it up. What you want, Kale? I don't answer questions on Christmas Eve."

Jackson said, "Make an exception this time, Duke, please?"

Kale seemed interested in a blue bulb on the tree. "I got somebody down the precinct who wants a look at you, Duke. If he likes your face you'll spend Christmas in the city prison. This time nobody's gonna bail you out." He seemed to be enjoying himself. "This time I'm locking you up and throwing away the key."

Joey cried, "You never stop, do you, Kale? Even if you gotta frame him, you'll see that Duke does time."

Jackson said, "It ain't us, Joey. This guy is a pest. We never saw him before. He says he saw the picture in the paper and is sure he recognizes Duke as an old acquaintance. He could be wrong."

Duke said, "Suppose he recognizes me, what's he say I did?"

Kale said, "Put on a coat or something and we'll get moving. I wouldn't want you to die of pneumonia."

Duke cried, "Can't you answer a civil question? I've got a right to know."

Jackson snapped. "You and your rights. How about the rights of others? Where you keep your switch knife, Duke?"

Joey cried, "Duke's got no switch. It's against the law."

Kale nodded. "That it is. It's a lot worse if it's used on a guy's face."

Duke moved around to the far side of the table. "What kind of frame is this, Kale?"

Kale said, "We'll put you in a lineup, Koslo; ten guys, so the odds are nine to one the complainant don't finger you. Let's not argue about it. Get your coat."

Duke turned toward his bedroom.

Jackson said, "Maybe I better go with you."

In a sudden burst of fury, Duke upended the table, raced past Joey. Kale yanked out his revolver.

"Don't make me do this, Koslo."

The bedroom door slammed closed. Kale took two steps. Joey cried out, toppled sidewise. The stepladder and Joey came down on Kale, knocking him off his feet. Jackson, his revolver in his hand, tried to step around them but Joey was in his way. Cursing, Kale pushed himself up from the floor. This time Jackson hopped over Joey and the ladder, crashed his shoulder against the bedroom door, knocking it wide.

"Stop," he cried. "You damn-fool kid."

The shot reverberated through the house like a clap of thunder. Mom sat mute, her eyes shrieking their anguish, her frail body trembling. Jackson came racing back through the kitchen and disappeared into the hall. Kale, out on the fire escape, fired twice more, then hustled down the ladder.

Somewhere nearby a woman was screaming.

It was ten minutes before the two detectives returned. There was disappointment in Kale's face as he said, "He can't run far, we'll get him." He pointed a finger at Joey. "Don't tell me you fell off that ladder by accident."

"You pulled your gun and I got scared and fell over."

Jackson spat dryly. "Okay, so you helped him get away. What good's it gonna do him? He had a fair chance to beat the complaint. That union official could pick out somebody else or decide nobody in the lineup slashed his face. Now, we don't need a lineup. We've got a *prima-facie* case against Duke Koslo. After all, this guy McNimmo did pick out your brother from a newspaper picture. That, and his escaping custody . . . Now, if you don't mind, we're gonna give this house a good going-over. When we find a switchblade, we'll stop looking."

When the detectives had returned to the bedroom to begin their search, Joey stared at his tired reflection in the small mirror nailed to the wall, then shifted his gaze to the alarm clock. After a while he knew how Duke had pulled a fast one on him.

Chapter 29

Every time Benny Cantor entered his parents' apartment on Attorney Street his usual good humor deserted him. He didn't know why, but once his feet crossed the threshold he got that peculiar ache inside him and everything in the house, the old, worn furniture, the cracked windowpane, the cleanly scrubbed linoleum, his parents, everything and everybody annoyed him.

It was seven o'clock Christmas morning when he pushed open the door and went into the flat to lay the bag of groceries and the two newspapers, the *News* and the *Jewish Daily Forward*, on the table. Poppa, wearing his phylacteries and prayer shawl as he rocked over a prayer book, barely glanced up to see who had come in.

Benny watched him for a moment, his lips twisted in disdain, then unable to take any more, cried out, "What a house! Night and day the door always open. Someday you'll get taken for everything you got. You'll wake up naked in an empty house."

Momma came in from the bedroom, a welcome smile on her well-rounded face. "Sh! Don't disturb Poppa, Benale."

Benny, his gaze still fixed on the old man, cried, "So I'll disturb him! What'll he do, beat my ears off like in the old days?"

She wiped her hands on her cotton print dress. "Please, darling, don't aggravate Poppa."

"If I can be aggravated, he can be aggravated."

She rose on her toes to kiss Benny's cheek. "What could aggravate my big businessman?"

Poppa removed the shawl, folded it neatly and placed it in one of the two velvet sacks, then removed the leather box from his forehead and unwound the strap and second box tied around his left arm. Only after he'd deposited the phylacteries in the other sack did he turn with a glance that was neither cool nor friendly but something in between.

"You can't sleep again, my dear son, so you pay us a visit."

Benny turned on him. "Don't pick on me today. I'm not in the mood."

The old man's eyes were wise and shrewd with his years. "You're in trouble."

Scorn thickened Benny's voice. "If I was in trouble I wouldn't come to you, that's for sure."

"If I hurt your feelings, if I insulted you, my dear son, don't come to see me again."

"Sure," Benny shouted. "You got rid of Rose, now you want to get rid of me."

The old man looked inside the grocery bag on the table, took out a worn black change purse. "How much for the rolls and milk and butter?"

"Keep your money." Benny stomped around the room. "I stole the stuff."

The old man counted out change. "I pay full price for stolen merchandise. A million times I told you, us you don't have to feed. Thank God I can still make a living for me and Momma."

"Someday that pressing machine will collapse, then you'll come to me for a glass of tea."

"When that happens it will be time to take a gas pipe."

Benny flipped open the *News* and read the identical headline he and Verde had stared at while sitting in the car on the Wantaugh outskirts at one o'clock that morning:

POLICE NET OUT FOR KOSLO

He turned a page and read:

YOUTH WANTED FOR QUESTIONING IN SLASHING

A numbered picture of Duke taken after his arrest for possession of narcotics the morning before filled a quarter of the page.

Verde had explained the situation to Benny while Matt Green listened from the front seat.

"I want the brothers knocked off and buried forever, a Judge Crater job. Burning them in the street will make too many headlines. Yeah, Benny, both of 'em. If Joey found out Duke got the business, you know he'd make me trouble. That guy's crazy enough to come with a heater full

of peas. Not that he'd bother me but I'd have to gun him down and I'd have trouble with the cops. This is one job I don't enjoy, believe me. I like the kids. But if they grab Duke now on this new rap, he's gotta talk or spend a lot of years in Elmira. They would have given him a break on the narcotics, but on this new rap he ain't got a chance unless he talks. Duke's not the type to take a rap if he can talk his way into probation. So he's gotta go. And Joey." Verde had sighed, obviously regretful at the turn of events. "Matt, I don't have to tell you, if Duke talks about those guns, you're it; you were his partner. Also in that face-cutting job. The same goes for Benny; the whole god-dam smuggling racket is tied in with Benny. Matt, I explained to Benny: the kid can't pin anything on me. It's you and Benny. Only I can't afford, once the kid opens up, to let the cops put you two behind bars. You know too much. Even if I didn't want you boys knocked off, I got a boss too and for my sake, for his sake, for the organization, he's got to order your executions. So you boys got a chance: It's your heads or the brothers Koslo. You shouldn't have trouble getting them. Let Joey lead you to his brother, then take them both for a ride. My best biff guy, Hy Pace, will give you a hand."

Benny slapped the newspaper off the table to the floor. *It's you or them. To save your hide you got to kill your old friend Joey and his brother Duke. The first time in your life you carry a cannon, you got to use it against a guy you ate with, slept with. . . .*

Momma said, "Eat something, Bennale."

"I'm not hungry," he said. "I got pains."

"In your business," Poppa said, "you get nothing for nothing. For everything you got to pay. Blood, tears and ulcers . . ."

"Enough, Poppa," he cried. "You're right, Poppa, a hundred-per-cent right. That's why I hate to come in here. You talk and what you say is so true, my stomach turns and aches and I gotta make a run for the toilet. But I got into this racket—"

"My fine son-in-law introduced you to the devil."

"—and I don't want to get out."

The shrewd eyes narrowed. "Don't you, Benny?"

Benny pulled a roll of bills out of his pocket. "Look, Poppa. You ever see so much money in your life? All the

time I'm loaded. You should see the flat I live in. Like a palace."

Softly the old man said, "But pains in the belly you still got."

Benny held out the roll. "Give this to the rabbi. I want him to say *Tilhem* for me."

"You can't buy off the devil with money."

"What's the difference, Poppa? You want something, you use the prayer book. I use money. Please, Poppa!"

Momma said, "Never did I see you like this. You sick?" She touched his forehead. "Cold, like ice."

"I'm all right," Benny protested, moving away from her.

Poppa said, "You're in trouble, my son."

Benny didn't answer.

Poppa said, "Sooner or later that's how it had to be. If you had listened to Poppa. If we could turn the clock back . . ."

Benny cried, "If my grandmother had balls she'd be my grandfather. What's the use of talking of what could have been? Poppa, you say *Tilhem* for me."

Poppa shook his head. "It don't hurt you to go to *Schul* and say it yourself. In prayer there should be dignity. You got none but God will overlook it this time."

Benny stared at him. The last time he'd said the prayer of supplication was when Joey had gone to the hospital after the savage beating by Verde's boys. Benny had prayed to God that his friend wouldn't die from the injuries received. What would be the nature of his humble petition now?

Poppa said, "You need help, you ask for it yourself. God will listen."

"I don't need help; I need forgiveness."

Poppa stared. "You done something bad."

Benny shook his head. "Not yet, Poppa . . ."

He went outside and stood on the landing for a full minute. How do you ask God earnestly and humbly to forgive you for what you were about to do, a crime as black as killing your own brother. Once he and Joey had been closer than most brothers. . . .

Chapter 30

Joey knocked on the door. "It's me, Joey," he said.

The door was opened and closed quickly behind him as he stepped into the empty flat of the condemned building. The tin covering on the windows had been forced back to permit light. The walls were shattered, chunks of plaster littering the floor, the plaster boards wet and naked. Joey stared at the pile of food on the floor, four loaves of white bread, jars of mustard, pickles, fruits and gefüllte fish, cans of beans, beef stew and chile con carne, a box of napkins.

Duke grinned. "Pinto turned off a grocery store."

There were hollows around Duke's eyes and his face had a thin, haunted look.

Joey said, "You got enough bread and pickles, anyway."

The gray afternoon light lay across layers of dust on the floor. Their voices made an echo that gave Joey an eerie feeling. He watched a gray rat emerge from a hole in the baseboard, nibble on the open package of white bread. Another rat joined it.

Duke said, "Everybody about to die gets a last meal. Tomorrow the workers tear down this building and those rats will all get killed."

He sat on the floor, leaned his back against the wall. "You were careful coming here, Joey?"

Joey stuffed his hands in his pockets so Duke wouldn't see how they were shaking.

"Pinto tipped me off where you were about ten minutes ago. I went up the corner building, crossed two roofs and came down. Nobody could've tailed me."

Duke stretched, moaned. "All of a sudden I feel so tired . . . old. Ain't this some place to spend Christmas Day? I got to get out of here. One more night and I'll go crazy. Besides, those workers will be here early."

Joey said, "I'm gonna talk to Verde. He got you in this jam, the least he can do is help you."

Duke looked up at Joey. "He'll help me into a concrete coffin."

"What the hell you talking about?"

Duke laughed tiredly, rubbed his stubble of beard. "Don't you understand, Joey? Can't you figure it out? Put yourself in Verde's place."

"I'd help my boys—"

Duke got on his feet. "My mistake. You couldn't put yourself in Verde's place. I can, because I could make a good Verde, if I live long enough. Joey, Augie's got to protect his interests."

Joey shook his head. "I can't see it. Duke, I'm gonna talk to him. He's got connections on the freighters. He can get you out of the country, nice and easy."

Duke touched his brother's face with his fingertips. "Joey, listen to me." Joey's lips twitched. The boy looked much older and in his eyes was a wisdom beyond his years. "Joey, they got to get me out of the way before the cops catch up to me. I know too much. They couldn't take the chance that I'm strong enough to go through a good cop workout."

Joey felt suddenly cold. He lifted his coat lapels. "He lays a hand on you, I'll kill him, so help me God. I'll get me a cannon and blow every one of 'em out of this world."

Duke smiled. "Sure, Joey. What good is it gonna do me if I'm not around to watch the fun?"

Joey blurted out, "You gotta give yourself up to the cops."

Duke stepped back in amazement. "You don't care how I commit suicide, do you? You think I can last one month in a cell?"

Joey's voice shook. "It's better than getting killed."

"Augie's way is better, easier, faster."

"In prison you'll be safe. After a while maybe Verde will get his lumps. Maybe he'll drop dead or something. When you come out of prison—"

"No, Joey, you got the wrong guy."

"At the most, they'll give you a year, maybe two. You're only a kid."

Duke took a cigarette out of his pocket. For the first time Joey realized the boy had no coat. Duke held up the cigarette, laughed mischievously. "You don't mind if I break training, Joey?" He lighted the cigarette, pulled smoke into

his lungs. "Put me in the can, I'd get soft in the head. I spent a lot of years tied up in bed when I was a kid. I could never take that again. Besides, this would be worse. When you're sick your mind can accept it a lot faster than when you're healthy and locked in a barred room. So my head will get softer and softer and after a while I'll start talking like an idiot. Lately I been dreaming a lot about Charlie Patterson. You know, Joey, every time it's me killing Charlie? I wrap my arms around his neck and he dies."

Joey shuddered. "Cut it out, Duke. Next thing you'll be talking yourself into something crazy."

Duke's face had a peaked, haunted look. "That's what I'm trying to tell you, Joey. I'll get talking wacky and the cops will pin a murder rap on me." After two puffs he dropped the cigarette on the floor, stepped on it. "I'm better off buckin' Verde, believe me."

Joey hunched his shoulders. "I still think he'd help . . ."

Duke grasped his brother's arms fiercely and in a voice that was tight and harsh, said, "Never mind what you think, Joey. This is my life. Let me decide what the score is." He walked to the window, squinted through the opening he'd made. "Soon it'll be dark. That's when I gotta make my move."

"Where'll you go? Between the cops and Augie . . ."

"Pinto is heisting a car for me. I'll make it, Joey, as far as I can go. I'll need money."

Joey said, "I got eight, maybe nine hundred in the house. I don't need it."

Duke winked. "Thanks. In my suede shoes, the blue pair, you'll find three hundred. Bring it all—if you're staying behind. If you're coming with me, leave Mom a couple hundred. I don't know what's gonna happen with Mom. I just can't think that far ahead."

Joey said, "You want me to go with you?"

"You know I want that more than anything."

Joey moved toward the door. "I'll be back with the money and your lumberjacket soon's it gets dark."

"Are you coming with me?"

"I don't know, Duke."

"Once I get away you might have trouble with Verde."

Joey grinned. "A lot more than you think. I made up my mind, Duke, I'm through with that mob. I never should've let myself fall in. I never did get any kicks out of it."

Duke frowned. "You're in a jam if you start that with Verde. Joey, I need you, I want you to come with me."

"I still don't know."

"Tina?"

His forehead wrinkled, Joey buttoned his coat around his neck. He stuck his hands in his pockets and stood there for a while, then he said, "I got nothing to keep me here, Duke. I've been kidding myself. I'm with you."

Jubilant, Duke embraced him in a bear hug. "Attaboy, Joey boy. Me and you, we'll do all right."

"I better get out now. It'll be dark before you know it. See you soon." He opened the door, heard a tiny catch of sound behind him. "You say something, Duke?"

Scratching his head, Duke said. "Well, you could do me a favor. In the back of the clubrooms, behind the stove I got something stashed. I was wondering if you'd bring it for me."

Joey gave him a searching glance. "Protection?"

"Just in case."

"We don't need it."

"Strictly protection, Joey, take my word for it."

"What is it?"

"A Police Special Colt, with six peas ready in it, nice and new."

Joey stared. "You never did drop it in the river. I should've figured that out for myself. Too many punches around my head didn't help me any. What went into the river?"

"A half-brick. Don't be sore, Joey. I just couldn't throw it away. From the first minute I saw the sleek cannon—"

"Okay, okay," Joey said. "You don't have to explain."

"It's wrapped in cotton gauze, in a paper bag."

Joey said firmly, "It can rot in that bag. We don't need it."

Duke sighed. "If Verde tries to stop us, we can always throw spitballs."

"We'll make out okay without a gun. So long for a while."

Joey went up the rickety stairs, slowly, carefully, stepping over the gaps where the wood had rotted into nothing. Once Joey's foot went through a step, scraping his ankle. In pulling out the foot, he leaned against the bannister, bending it to one side. Off balance, he almost fell to

the floor below, righting himself in time. The roof had gaping holes in the tar paper but carefully skirting the edges near the parapets which he could hold for support, Joey made it safely to the adjoining building.

He raced down the stairs. A woman, shaking a dust mop over the stair well, watched him tearing down and hurried off into the darkness of the corridor. Only when he reached the street door did Joey stop. He stood in the hallway, his nose pressed against the glass, wary eyes shifting up and down the street. He opened the door, flattened himself against the letter boxes, sidled to the stoop stairs and leaned out.

Benny Cantor was standing near a pump halfway up the street. Joey pulled in his head. Chewing on his lower lip he wondered whether to ask Benny for help. Benny was his friend. Benny knew the docks, the people who worked on them, at least a dozen freight captains. Benny could get the Koslo brothers to South America, to Europe, to wherever they could find safety.

Would Benny take the chance? That was the big question. Should Verde learn Benny had helped Duke escape, his shiv boys would cut Benny's heart out. But suppose Duke's theories were all wrong? Suppose Verde were not after Duke's life?

He looked out again. Benny hadn't moved, except to stick a cigar into his mouth. Hands clenched in his coat pockets, Joey decided to talk to Benny, feel him out. Hell, he could always walk away from Benny, who neither could nor would try to stop him. It was well known in the organization Benny never packed a cannon.

But a sixth sense kept him rooted to the spot. Benny flung his cigar away, moved slowly across the gutter. A black Chrysler sedan came slowly around the corner, hugging the curb, stopping in front of Benny. Matt Green got out of the car, then Big Pace, Verde's chief biff guy. Joey had no further doubt in his mind that Duke was right.

The three men stood talking for a few minutes before getting into the car. Joey ducked back into the hallway, flattened himself against the wall and stayed frozen for a full minute after the Chrysler had whisked past.

Eleven hundred dollars evenly distributed in his trouser pockets, Joey threw Duke's gray and blue lumberjacket

over his arm and came into the kitchen. He wished his old flashlight were working. But either the batteries were dead, which was ninety-nine-per-cent certain, or the mechanism had gone on the fritz. Getting safely back to Duke without a light would be next to impossible.

Mom sat in her rocker, in the same pose, the same tired expression on her face, the same housedress. Joey picked up her handbag from the table, pressed it open, dropped in three hundred dollars, snapped it shut.

"You're going away," she said, not looking at him.

"For a little while, Mom. I'll get in touch with you."

"I'll never see you again."

"Oh, you'll see us again, me and Duke."

"I got a feeling."

"Everybody's got a feeling. It don't mean nothing."

"Where will you go?"

"I don't know. We'll send you money."

"Where'll you steal it?"

"Mom, look at me. Mom!"

She turned her head and lifted grief-stricken eyes up to his face.

"I give you my word," he said, "things are gonna be different. We'll start some business, a five-and-dime store or something we can handle. No crooked money, no rackets. I swear it, Mom. Me and Duke. You believe that, Mom?"

She looked into his earnest, pleading eyes, and bit into her lower lip. "If Duke will let you."

"What you talking about? Duke is a good kid and with me to steer him right, he'll do okay."

Her lips grew hard. "I don't doubt that Duke will do okay . . . for himself. Take care of yourself, Joey."

He laughed. "Don't worry, Mom. This is so long for a while." Awkwardly he touched her face. A warm tear dropped on his hand and he wiped it on his coat. "Mom, you mind if . . . for Duke, Mom. I know this is what he'd want to do." He dropped Duke's coat to the floor, and took her in his arms to hug her gently. "A kiss for Duke, Mom." He kissed her cheek, her forehead, her eyes.

She said, "No kiss from you, Joey?"

His answer caught in his throat and an odd sound came out as he took her head between his palms and kissed her

lips. Her tears ran down into his mouth, warm and salty and full of sorrow.

Abruptly he swept up Duke's coat. "So long, Mom."

The knock on the door was loud and authoritative. He felt a vague apprehension.

"If it's Benny, Mom, or police, tell 'em nothing."

The door was opening even as Joey disappeared into the bedroom. Benny's voice, smooth, unhurried, said, "I'm lookin' for Joey, Mrs. Koslo. It's important."

Joey opened the fire-escape window and eased himself out.

Chapter 31

It was six o'clock, the city covered by darkness as total and complete as it would ever be this day. The new flashlight he'd bought in Haber's stuffed in his coat pocket, Joey stood in the shadows of a hallway and looked up at the yellow light burning in the kitchen window of the second floor. Nothing moved in the house, nothing seemed alive, then for a brief second Tina's head came into view and he could feel his pulse racing. Indecision held him in the hallway for another minute before he crossed the gutter.

He knew Duke would be waiting, jumpy, impatient, but he had to say good-by to Tina. There was no purpose in it, nothing to be gained, yet that was how it had to be. A few minutes couldn't make that much difference in their escape plans.

She opened the door to his knock and stood there in all her loveliness, the hazel eyes soft on his face, dark hair curling behind her tiny ears, cheeks a smoldering red.

She smiled. "You can't just stand out there, Joey."

His mouth very dry all of a sudden, he murmured, "Just a couple minutes," and went inside.

He watched her close the door and go to the sink where cleaned dishes lay piled on the drainboard. She picked up a towel, began to wipe the silverware.

God, he thought, if I could only hold her close for one

lousy minute! He thought with a wrenching desolation that he would never see her, never hear her voice again.

Trying desperately to conceal the anguish inside him, he said, "You have your turkey dinner?"

"Chicken," she said. "It was good too. Mom's gone upstairs to Mrs. Gold to get her special recipe for marinated fish."

He dropped Duke's coat on a chair, unbuttoned his own. "I guess she'll have to make a lot of different dishes for your wedding. In this neighborhood you gotta invite the League of Nations."

"Wedding?" She dried a dish that would never be any drier, then wiped it again.

He nodded. "Your mother told me. Mel is a nice guy. High-class."

She lay the dish down, a puzzled look in her face. "What would I do with a high-class boy, Joey?"

His heart began to beat faster. "You're as good as anybody, Tina. Don't let nobody tell you different. You got class, plenty. A lot more than a bum like me'll ever have."

She smiled tenderly. "You and I, Joey, we have the same kind of class. We think alike, talk alike, we are alike."

There was a funny ache in his throat. "You talking yourself into something?"

She nodded. "Yes, Joey, because that's how I want it. Now and forever. Joey, don't you understand what I'm trying to say?"

He said dully, "You're not getting married."

"You catch on fast. Oh, I tried. I even convinced myself I was in love with Mel. It worked for a while. I'd close my eyes and his kisses weren't different from yours but when I opened them it was Mel, not you, Joey, and it wasn't the same. I'd go to bed at night and I'd think of Mel but you'd always come, and no matter how I tried I couldn't push you out of my mind."

A glad cry escaping his lips, he swept her into his arms, smothered her face with kisses. A dish fell off the sink and clattered to the floor, surprisingly did not break.

He said hoarsely, "I feel like I could bust out crying. I missed you so much, baby, day and night, like you left me a million years ago."

"You stayed away so long, I was ready to go after you."

"I was here day before yesterday. Brought you a present."

"Oh, Joey, I'm sorry I wasn't here."

He ran his lips over her neck. "Just some stockings. I threw them away."

"You'll buy me others . . . after we're married."

"Married?" He untangled himself and moved away from her.

There was a catch in her voice. "I'm sorry, Joey, if I took things for granted. Just that all of a sudden I love you so much I don't care what you do, I just want to be your wife. Even if you never quit the gang—"

"I have quit and nothing could get me back in."

"Oh, I'm glad." She moved close again. "Joey, if it's a job you're worrying about, there's been one waiting for you all week. Mr. Forrester was keeping it open, hoping you'd come to him. Settlement gym instructor, Joey. You'd work with children, keep them out of mischief. Mr. Forrester says you'd be good at teaching the children basketball, calisthenics, boxing. You understand these children—"

"Cut it out," he cried.

"Don't you want the job?"

"Like I want my right arm." The intolerable anguish was back. "But I can't take it."

"A few more days and somebody else will get it."

"I can't help that."

"I don't understand you, Joey."

He shrugged. "I came to say good-by. I'm going away on a long trip."

"Anything to do with Duke?"

He lifted his hands in a plea for understanding. "Don't ask questions, Tina. The police don't want me. I promised Duke I'd go with him."

"No!" she cried. "You can't, not now."

"He needs me."

"I need you, Joey." She kissed him frantically. "Hold me, Joey, love me."

"You're making it tough."

"Where will you go, what will you do?"

"I don't know."

"Here you've got a job, your kind of job, you've got me. What will you have out in no man's land?"

"I'll come back, baby. I promise. Just let me see that Duke gets set straight."

"How long will that be?"

"I can't tell."

"I can." Her eyes flashed with tears. "For the rest of his life you'll be setting him straight and you'll never succeed. Joey, please!"

"Six months, a year—"

She slipped her arms around his neck. "I'd die in six months. I'm going with you."

"No."

"I won't be in the way."

"It would be a lousy honeymoon."

"You can't just walk out of my life. I won't let you."

"Please, Tina! Stop ripping me apart."

The tears ran freely. "All right, Joey. I've got nothing else to do but wait for my lover."

He kissed her lips, her eyes, the tears flowing, and he thought, First Mom, then Tina, crying . . . Then he was out of the house, almost running down the stairs, Duke's coat over his left arm.

A cold drizzle was falling as he turned into Orchard Street. The block looked desolate, deserted. He walked past the club. No sound came from inside. Hunching his shoulders against the rain, he walked to the corner, square into Francine. Her blond hair was wet, disheveled, the make-up on her face blotched.

"Joey! Oh, I'm glad to see you."

He tried to push past her. "I can't stop now."

She grasped the coat in his arms. "Duke," she pleaded, "I've got to see him. Where is he, Joey?"

"I don't know," he said gruffly.

"Please, Joey. I've got to see Duke."

"Why?"

"I love him, Joey. I've been going crazy wondering where he is, what he's doing, if he's safe."

"He's safe, that's all I can tell you."

"Take me to him."

"You crazy?"

"He'll be glad to see me. Joey, he loves me too. I know he does."

Joey said bluntly, "Duke don't love nobody."

Frantic, she held the coat with both hands. "You don't know what you're saying. I'll lose my mind."

"For cryin' out loud," he cried, looking about him. "I can't stand here arguing with you. And I can't take you with me. If Duke wants you, wherever he is, wherever he goes, he knows your address." He slapped her hands away from the coat. "Now get the hell away from me."

"I'll be down the club. Tell Duke . . ."

He went down the street, looking back every few yards, a vague fear slowing him down, as if someone were following him. Once he thought he saw a form slipping into a hallway. He stopped to look back quickly. No one was there. On the next corner, he paused in front of a building, stood there for a full minute. There was a blue Buick hard-top convertible parked in front. He glanced inside. It was empty. One more look up and down the street, then he stepped into the hallway and climbed to the roof.

With the aid of the flashlight, he had no trouble getting over the rooftops and down into the condemned building. A flashlight in his hand, Duke met him on the landing.

Leading Joey back to the apartment, Duke explained, "Pinto left the flash. And he's got a blue Buick parked on the corner."

"So it's your car. I should have figured."

Duke took the lumberjacket, slipped into it. "This feels good. I froze my ass off. What took you so long?"

In Joey burned a hot wild urgency to get out of the building, into the car and away. "We'll talk later."

"You stopped to see Tina?"

Joey played with his flashlight. "I had to say good-by."

Duke chuckled. "I suppose."

"I'm getting leery, Duke. I had a feeling I was being tailed. Soon as I left Francine—" He bit his tongue, knowing he had said too much. "Soon as I left her—I told her you'd get in touch—I had that feeling."

Duke lifted his coat collar. "You sit in the car. The club is just two blocks away. I can make it up and back in five minutes."

Joey gaped. "How'd you know Francine'd be down the club?"

Duke gave him an odd look. "I just guessed."

"It isn't Francine," Joey said. "You want that revolver."

Duke shrugged. "Who needs it? I just wanna say good-bye to my girl."

"Duke, it's too dangerous—"

Gruffy, Duke cried, "You said your good-bys. For you it wasn't dangerous? I'm sorry, Joey. I just got to tell her myself everything is gonna be okay. Now be a good guy, sit in the car."

"No," Joey said. "I'd rather stay here; it's a lot safer."

About to argue the point, Duke changed his mind. "Okay, Joey."

"Be careful. Those holes in the roof are a mile wide."

"I'm not going over the roof. I ripped open a tin window in the basement. I'll get out easy. See you . . ."

Barely five minutes had passed when Joey heard a foot-step out in the corridor. Duke's coming back, he thought, he's changed his mind. He opened the apartment door.

"Duke?" There was no sound. Joey pressed the flash button. The cone of light covered the hallway, hit shoes, legs and then landed full in Benny's face. In return Benny lighted his own flashlight.

"I been looking for you, Joey." Glibly he added, "Why you ducking me? I saw you go up the corner building. I hollered but you kept going so I followed you up on the roof, where I lost you. Took me a minute to figure out where you must've gone. So I got my car flash." He walked through the corridor. "Should have figured this'd be a good hideout for Duke. Okay, tell Duke he can come out, everything's okay."

"Is it, Benny?"

Benny stared blankly at a point over Joey's head. "Verde wants to help Duke get away. Augie's got a place out in Las Vegas where Duke could really get lost."

A flicker of hope touched his mind but was quickly torn away when he saw the bulge in Benny's pocket. "You got a piece, Benny? Never seen you with one before."

Benny shifted his feet self-consciously. "Voices sound funny in here. Why don't you get Duke?"

"He's not here, Benny."

"Don't gimme that."

"You wanna look? Go on, nobody's stopping you."

Benny kicked open the door of the apartment, flashed his light inside, but did not enter. "He's gotta be around here

someplace. Joey, don't you want Verde to help him?"

"How come you're looking for Duke all by your lonesome?"

Benny laughed. "What for I need a search party?"

"I thought maybe some of Verde's boys might be around someplace waitin' for you to find Duke."

Benny was surprised and insulted. "You're a suspicious bastard, Joey. I just told you Augie wants to help Duke."

"Sure," Joey cried, bitterness in his heart. "You and Augie."

"I'm your friend, Joey."

"Since when?"

"Always. Hell, ever since you got out of the can, ain't I been trying to set you up in a cushy job? Didn't I offer you money, clothes?"

Joey cried, "Your goddam conscience was eatin' you up; you hadda do something for me so you could sleep nights."

Benny's left eye began to twitch. "What's this conscience business? I wasn't responsible for your winding up in a hospital."

Joey laughed harshly. "At least you know what I'm talking about. You arranged the deal with Verde for me to dive. You talked me into it. I could've taken that Greek any round, any minute, like I finally decided to do. If you didn't make that deal Verde wouldn't have sent his boys around to bang me up. I would've gone on boxing my way up to the championship."

Benny raised his head angrily. "In a million years you couldn't make it. Setups, that's all I was feeding you. And Benzedrine pills to pep you up."

"You didn't gimme no Bennies when I beat that Greek."

Benny cried, "The hell with that stuff. You wanna help Duke or not?"

Joey's voice was thin and cold. "Get away from me, Benny, before I kill you."

"If that's how you want it."

Joey spat wetly in Benny's face. "This is how I want it."

Furious, Benny took a German Luger out of his coat pocket and yelled, "Augie, let's get going."

Verde came down one stair and into the corridor. Clutched in his hand was a black .45-caliber revolver.

A police car raced down the street outside, its siren, de-

manding the right of way, filling the empty building with a hollow reverberation. Somebody frantically blew a police whistle.

Verde said, "Benny, look around inside the flat."

Joey said, "Duke's gone, Augie, you'll never find him."

Verde said, "If he's not around now, he'll be back. Why else you hanging around? We'll get him, if Matt and Pace don't meet up with him on Orchard Street. Didn't expect to see me, did you, Joey? I could burn you just for making me come in from Wantaugh on this Christmas Day. The boys were gettin' noplace lookin' for you and Duke so General Verde decided he should come in and plan the strategy."

Without warning Verde kicked Joey between the legs, dropping him to his hands and knees. Nausea engulfed him in a sick wave.

Out in the street a boy was yelling obscenities. A girl answered him swiftly and appropriately.

Verde growled, "Lousy punch-drunk. Making me sweat." He back-handed Joey across the mouth. "Shootin' you is too good. Maybe we'll do a good job with a shiv."

Joey pushed himself erect, and stood there rocking. The boy in the street was swearing again, his voice suddenly drowned out by the noise of a homemade apple-box scooter fighting its way over the bumpy gutter. Somewhere in the building a tomcat was calling his mate.

Verde said, "I'll cut your belly wide open, yours and Duke's."

Joey spat viciously into Verde's face.

Verde cried out, lifted his gun, brought it down sharply on Joey's head. The corridor rocked crazily before Joey's eyes and suddenly the floor burst open in a shower of lights, dissolving quickly into total darkness that opened up to receive him.

Chapter 32

In the yard back of the Orchard A.C. Duke jabbed the window pane with his elbow, smashing the glass. He waited a few moments, then opened the catch through the opening, lifted the window and stepped into the dark room. Pale yellow light from the clubroom seeped under the door but it was quiet outside. Either the last one there had forgotten to douse the light or had fallen asleep on the couch. Not using the flashlight, Duke moved around the bed to the stove. The door opened so abruptly the breath whistled through Duke's teeth. He turned his head stiffly. Francine stood silhouetted in the doorway.

Wordlessly, he moved to her, looked over her head. The clubroom was empty.

"For cryin' out loud," he said. "Sneakin' up on a guy."

She was hurt. "I knew you'd come. Even if they are looking for you, you'd come to take me with you."

He stared. "You got rocks in your head? I didn't come for you."

Her shoulders sagged. "I thought you came special to see me. A couple of men were looking for you ten minutes ago."

He nodded. "Matt Green and Pace. I spotted them sitting in a car on the corner. That's why I hadda come in from the back. One minute and I'll blow."

"Take me with you, Duke," she cried.

"What the hell would I do with you?"

"I love you, Duke. You know I do."

"I know what you love," he laughed. "It ain't all of me."

Her eyes flashed hotly. "Don't treat me this way, Duke. You love me, you said you did a hundred times."

"Maybe more," he said. "Check the notches on your belly."

Breathing raggedly, she flung her arms around his neck. "You can't run out on me, Duke. I'll kill myself if you do." She kissed him savagely, her teeth cutting into his lower lip. "Take me, Duke, please, please, please."

He unwrapped her arms and moved her gently away. "I got to travel fast and far. You'd only slow me down."

Her eyes blurred with hot tears. "I'll never see you again."

Duke shrugged. "If that's how it's gotta be. It wasn't so bad, baby. We had a lot of fun. Now, we're growed up and the party's over. Be a good kid and don't start anything."

She sobbed. "I gave you what I never gave anybody. No matter when you asked, no matter how, I was yours. I won't let you go."

In a sudden burst of anger, he cried, "If I owe you anything, send me a bill at two bucks a throw."

Her hand flashed, stinging his face. "I hate you," she said. "I hate you worse than anything."

"I hope you do," he said sincerely. "Then maybe it'll be easier."

He pushed her out of the kitchen. "Go sit in a corner. I got something to do in here."

Closing the door, he flicked on the electric light and, flat on his belly, stuck his hand under the stove. He found the paper bag next to the wall. Ripping off the paper and cotton covering, he held the shiny revolver in his hand, balancing it, laying it against his face, enjoying the cool hard touch. He pushed himself to his feet, lifted his lumberjacket to slip the gun inside the top of his belted trousers. Dropping the coat over it, he patted the almost indiscernible bulge.

He took one last look around, then turned off the light and unbolted the yard door. He thought of Francine crying her eyes out on the couch. She'd been a good kid and he liked her very much. One last good-by kiss to remember her by . . .

He crossed the kitchen floor and opened the door. "Fran? Baby, I . . ."

The room was empty. He shrugged, a little disappointed that she hadn't waited.

The street door opened on noiseless hinges and just as quietly Big Pace, a .38-caliber revolver clutched in his hand, came into the clubroom, Matt Green, hands in pockets, a step behind. Duke cursed himself for his stupidity. He shouldn't have given Francine the chance to go running out to them. Bitterly, he thought, She ratted on me, my girl sold me dirt cheap.

Green said, "We saw the girl come out of here, her eyes running like a faucet, so we came down to see who made a good-lookin' gal so unhappy."

For some reason Duke felt a sense of relief. Franny hadn't pointed the finger at him. He laughed to himself: This is gonna make a difference when I'm six feet under?

Green said to Pace. "Okay, we got one. You think you can handle him so I can go find the Boss and report? Verde changed his strategy. Soon's we get one, we knock him off and concentrate on the other."

Pace's gun hand was steady. "I'll take him out to Van Cortlandt Park. I know a place. They'll never find him."

Green nodded in satisfaction. "Fine. Duke, you and your brother sure gave the Boss a lousy Christmas Day."

"He should talk," Duke said. "How about my Christmas, this year and the ones after?"

Green looked sad. "Can't say I'm sorry."

"Why don't we talk it over?"

Green turned his back on Duke. "Got no time. Gotta tell the Boss he's halfway back to his wife and kids for Christmas supper. He didn't feel good having to leave them in the middle of this holiday."

For a split second, Pace turned his head to look at Green and in that instant, Duke flung himself behind the couch, slipping his hand between the buttons of his coat for his revolver.

Green, annoyed, cried, "What's it gonna get you, Duke?" Not knowing Duke was armed, Green walked over to him. "C'mon out of there before I kick your goddam face in. Lousy punk kid, you gotta go, so do it like a man." He stopped abruptly, backed up a step, staring at the revolver pointed at his belly. "He's got a piece," he called out to Pace.

Swiftly and clearly, Duke said, "Tell Hy to drop his gun or so help me I start blasting you, Matt."

His face gray as ashes, Green cried, "We'll make you eat that cannon, Duke, every piece of it."

Not knowing how to combat Green's disregard for the revolver, Duke stuck his head over the couch. Pace, his revolver held loosely in his hand, lips parted, was looking at Green for guidance.

Duke pointed the revolver at the wavering figure. "Drop it, Hy."

His mind suddenly made up for him, Pace fired from the hip. Duke gasped as a sear of flame tore through his left shoulder. He fell back against the wall just in time to see the chair come sailing out of Green's brawny hands. Instinctively, Duke fired twice, as if this would stop the chair, but the legs crashed into the side of his head, stunning him.

Green clutched at his throat, took a step, his hands dropping at his sides. Duke stared at Green's throat where the flesh had exploded into a gaping black hole, blood leaping out in spurts. Abruptly, Green's legs buckled and he dropped in a heap.

Duke shook his head to clear it. "Pace," he cried, "Matt is dead. The cops will be here any second. Let's make a deal."

"I gotta kill you," Pace said, neither excitement nor anger in his voice. "The cops can go to hell."

Duke lifted his head over the couch, pegged a shot, missed. Pace quickly upended the table and scampered down behind it. Duke glanced behind him at the open kitchen door barely six feet away. If only he could get out into the yards and alleys, among the fences, nobody could catch him. Another jab of pain in his shoulder reminded him that climbing fences wouldn't be like swiping cherries off a pushcart. Just two fences, the eight-foot one in this yard and the five-foot one he could almost hop over, and he'd be in the clear.

Wincing from the effort, Duke got into a squatting position, pumped a shot at the table, then bolted erect. After another shot to distract Pace, he dashed into the kitchen, slammed the door behind him. Two quick bullets from Pace's revolver not only swung the door wide but splintered it down the middle.

Praying that Pace would have respect for his last bullet, Duke slipped out into the yard. He stuffed the revolver back into the top of his trousers, took a running start and leaped for the top of the fence. He hung on with his right hand alone, the left having refused to obey his brain. Panting, he pulled himself up by the one hand, and as he did a picture of Pace, his revolver aimed at Duke's back, brought a cold sweat to his face. He hooked his left foot over the fence, then his leg. With a desperate effort he swung around and flung himself over, dropping to the hard concrete on his feet, falling face down.

Now the pain in his shoulder was sheer agony.

The next fence was practically a running high jump. Even as he hurried into the alley, he heard Pace scaling the big fence. Now Pace was crouching on top like a big cat. Pace fired, his bullet chipping the brick building. Duke ran, and from up above him, the voices of people, frightened and curious, were a chaos of sound.

Duke circled the block and crossed the gutter into Orchard Street. Looking back, he could see the police prowl cars, the people flocking from every direction, bare heads sticking out of windows, families on the fire escapes watching from the best available position. One of the policemen was hurrying up the street in Duke's direction. Duke looked around for Pace but the man was nowhere in sight. Duke's eyes caught the black spots on the sidewalk, black quarters as evenly spaced as footsteps. Only when he saw that the big drops stopped at his feet did he realize this was his own lifeblood running down his arm and off his fingertips.

Just as he reached the condemned building, he saw Pace turn the corner. Duke ducked into the basement. In a minute he'd worked his way through the opening he'd made scarcely a half-hour before in the tin-covered basement window. With the aid of the flashlight he found the stairs, and by the time he'd gone up half a flight the sweat was pouring down into his eyes.

The next half-flight was torture. He sat down on the landing. "Joey!" he whispered hoarsely, afraid lest a shout could be heard outside. "Gimme a hand, Joey."

The echo rolled and faded. He bit into his lip, pushed himself up, leaned on the wall for support. One step at a time, he made the second landing, then, all the strength drained out of him, he sank to the floor, the flashlight rolling out of his hand, teetering on the edge of the landing. "Joey! It's me, Duke, please . . . Joey!"

A sob escaped his lips as he came up on his knees, lifted the flashlight and began to crawl across the stairhead and up the next flight. And finally he was on the fourth floor, where he'd left Joey, and he knew now everything would be all right.

"Joey?" Grasping a jagged edge of broken wall, he pulled himself up and as he did, something hard was shoved into his back and Benny's voice said, "Welcome back, Duke."

"Joey," he cried, miserably, "What happened?"

Benny said, "Come on out, Augie. We can wrap up the job now."

Pushing Joey ahead of him, Verde came out of the flat, black revolver in one hand, flashlight in the other. Duke's eyes blurred as he stared at Joey's battered face.

"What have they done to you, Joey?"

Joey ran his fist across his nose, leaving a crimson smear. "I tried to holler when I heard you calling. Augie didn't like it."

Verde moved a step closer. "Less talking and more action. We gotta get out of here."

"Why?" Benny said. "This is as good a place as any. I can get a silencer for this cannon—"

"No," Verde said. "I don't want the bodies found for a long time."

Benny said, "I'm sorry, fellers. You know that."

"Sure, and so'm I," Duke said, suddenly lunging into Benny, smashing him against the railing so hard the Luger fell out of his hand. The sound of splintering wood echoed loudly through the empty building. Benny screamed, his eyes glassy marbles as he reached for Duke, then toppled backward into the well. His cry was shrill and thin with terror, ending abruptly as he crashed into the cement on the ground floor.

Verde's revolver jumped and belched fire. Duke gasped, clutched at his belly. Snarling, Verde pressed the trigger but the second shot was never fired. Yelling obscenities, Joey crashed a left and right into Verde's face, staggering him against the wall, knocking off a section of plaster. Revolver and flashlight dropped to the floor. Joey slammed home his left and even as Verde sank slowly down, Joey kicked him twice in the head.

"Duke?" Joey picked up the flashlight. The beam wavered. "Where'd he get you, Duke?"

A twisted grin on his face, Duke looked up at Joey with glazed eyes. He opened his lips but nothing came out.

Somebody was banging on the sealed street door.

Joey cried, "We can get over the roof."

Duke laughed hoarsely. "You, Joey, not me. But you got nothing to worry about. They got nothing on you."

"We can make it," Joey pleaded. "Then I'll get a doctor and fix you up."

Duke shook his head. "I don't need a doctor. I need an undertaker."

Covering his face with his hands, Joey began to sob as he sank to his knees.

You follow the two big cops carrying Duke on the litter down the broken stairs. Verde, handcuffed, one step behind you, is in Lieutenant Kale's custody.

Kale, holding Duke's revolver in his hand, says to Verde, "Just yesterday I was hoping we could link you with these stolen revolvers so we could hit you with perjury. I didn't figure you'd accommodate us with a murder rap. Murder, Verde, because I have the ambulance doctor's word Koslo can't live till morning."

You come out in the air and Orchard Street is alive with people. You watch them place Duke into the ambulance, and you holler for them to take it easy.

Tina comes out of nowhere and takes your hand. "Stop crying, Joey," she says. "You and your Mom have cried enough for your brother."

Mr. Forrester stands somberly beside you. "If there's anything I can do, Joey . . ."

Not now, Mr. Forrester . . . tomorrow . . . for there's no reason now why you can't grab that job.

You dry your tears and go to the ambulance for the ride to the hospital with Duke. The doctor climbs out, shaking his head. Before he opens his mouth, you know your brother is dead.

THE END



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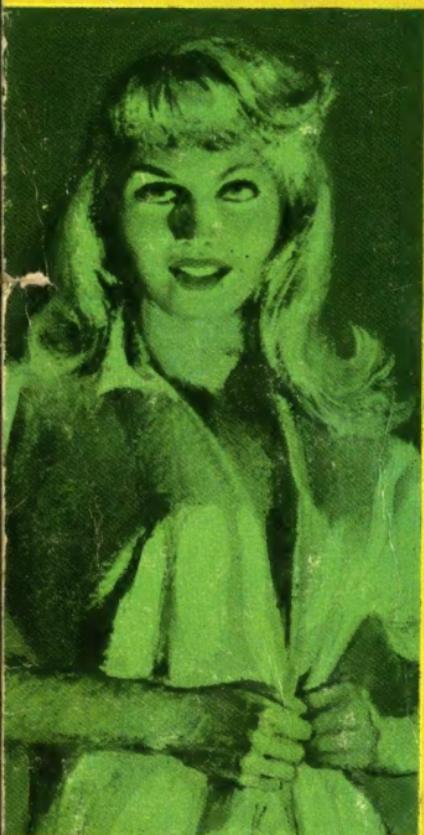
LOVE IS A FOUR LETTER WORD

by Anita Rowe
Block

Joey cried, "We can...
Duke laughed hoarsely. "You, *wallop*." —Pittsburgh PRESS
nothing to worry about. They got now...
"We can make it," Joey pleaded. "Then **NT**
and fix you up."



VIOLENCE IN THE STREETS



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